

Shadow in the Sun

A NOVEL OF ELIZABETH I, THE VIRGIN QUEEN



(BY F. W. KENYON

Shadow in the Sun

F. W. KENYON

F. W. Kenyon, famous for his historical novels about fascinating women—*Marie Antoinette*, *Mary of Scotland*, and *Josephine (The Emperor's Lady)*—now adds Elizabeth I of England to his gallery of portraits. His is the first novel to relate Elizabeth's story in its entirety, from her tomboyish youth until her death.

Elizabeth was the very embodiment of the lusty age that bears her name, an age of bloodshed and of brains. The Virgin Queen could match wits with the cleverest and most unscrupulous men of her time. She could enjoy herself hugely, dancing and gambling and riding her horses. She was also a scholar, a shrewd politician, and a great patriot. Much of her character is explained in the words of her vow, taken after Seymour's execution for treason:

I'll never give another man my love. I'll never trust another man again. I'll use all men in the future, twist them this way and that to my own advantage. And this I swear, never will I take a husband *unless his name be England*.

If a monarch with less singleness of purpose had been on the throne the fate of England might have been disastrous. Rent by civil and religious strife at home, threatened by invasion by the Spanish Armada, with plotters and spies and traitors on every hand, and with Mary Stuart close by and menacing, this was not a time for weakness. Although she was surrounded by her advisers and by her favorites, Robert Dudley and Christopher Hatton and most particularly Essex, it was Elizabeth alone who held her beloved England together in her slim and beautiful hands, the imperious redheaded queen and last of the Tudors.

Elizabeth I was truly one of the most intriguing personalities both as woman and as queen, and Mr. Kenyon's exciting and highly readable book does her full justice.

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the virgin queen Elizabeth I.

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Shadow in the Sun

By the Author

THE EMPEROR'S LADY
ROYAL MERRY-GO-ROUND

EMMA

MARIE ANTOINETTE

WITHOUT REGRET

MARY OF SCOTLAND

SHADOW IN THE SUN

Shadow
in the Sun

*A Novel about
the Virgin Queen
Elizabeth I*

By F. W. KENYON

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My care is like my shadow in the sun . . .

*I hated the thought of marriage, hated it
for a reason I'd confide in no one, not even
a twin soul . . .*

*When the end comes, no male hand must
touch the body of the queen who lived and
died a virgin. Nor must it be submitted to
dissection, as royal bodies are. As for em-
balmmment, that I also forbid . . .*

ELIZABETH TUDOR

Shadow in the Sun

I. Seymour

Chapter I

They wrestled in mock seriousness, the man and the girl, he partly dressed in trunks and shirt, she still in her linen night-dress and silver-embroidered cap. Laughing gaily, they rolled too close to the edge of the great square bed and fell to the floor with a resounding thud, the girl triumphantly astride her opponent's chest.

"Cunning wretch!" he laughed, gasping for breath.

"Cunning wretch yourself!" the girl retorted. "An accident, and well you know it!"

He looked up at her with unaccustomed gravity. "I was never much of a hand at praying, Your Grace, but I pray here and now that all future accidents, great or small, shall always leave you in command."

"Thank you, indeed, my dear Lord Admiral."

Lady Seymour, Dowager Queen of England, having lingered watchfully at the door stepped forward abruptly and tapped the girl on the shoulder.

"Enough's enough," she said acidly. "This early-morning horseplay is anything but dignified. For pity's sake get dressed. As for you, my gallant husband—" she prodded the man none too gently with her foot—"a moment of real prayer—on your knees, mind you, not the flat of your back—would do your soul no harm."

The girl sprang lightly to her feet, and then when Thomas Seymour, lord admiral of England, had followed his wife from the room, she summoned her maids and began the morning toilet.

She was fourteen and in many ways old for her years, this girl who was known to the whole of Tudor England as "the Lady Elizabeth." Frowning, she tore the nightcap from her head and with slim fingers smoothed back her tousled red hair. This was the first time that Catherine Seymour, who often enough joined in the morning romp herself, had spoken so harshly to Elizabeth, and the girl was both hurt and puzzled.

She had first met Catherine—Catherine Parr, as she then was—when her father, the late king, had brought her to court and made her the last of his six wives. Elizabeth all but chuckled to herself. Just think of it, not only countless mistresses, but six wives as well! The first had been Catherine of Aragon, mother of her half sister, the surly Lady Mary; the second—Elizabeth's eyes hardened—Anne Boleyn, her own infamous mother; the third, Jane Seymour, mother of her half brother Edward, the boy king; the fourth, Anne of Cleves; the fifth, Catherine Howard . . . Elizabeth frowned again. Her father's matrimonial entanglements always confused her.

Still troubled by Catherine Seymour's harshness, Elizabeth recalled how, from the first, she had been drawn to her new stepmother, had grown to love her deeply and had been happy to remain in her care after her father's death, even though within a month of that event, Catherine had married Thomas Seymour, brother of the lord protector of England, brother also of the late Jane Seymour, and thus uncle of Elizabeth's little half brother, the new king. She smiled wryly. Confusion on confusion! So much marrying and unmarrying—a divorce here, an execution there—and as a result, so many intricate relationships, intrigues and plots and counterplots, and withal the ever-present question: *Whose head will next fall at the block?* Some people said it might well be Thomas Seymour's, unless he watched his step.

Seymour himself was something of a puzzle to Elizabeth. Immediately after her father's death he had actually offered her his hand in marriage, despite her youth and the vast difference in their ages, and on her careful refusal had wasted no time in making this marriage with her stepmother. Why had he made me the offer, Elizabeth wondered. Why had he then turned to the king's widow? In heaven's name *why?* She must ask him some

day, if ever she got the chance. It was hard to be serious with Thomas Seymour. He'd turn an awkward question with a hearty laugh, tell a ribald joke, and have her laughing and forgetful with him. Perhaps it was true that, as people hinted, he was mad for power and would do anything to gain it, yet little power had come to him through marriage with Catherine. Elizabeth shrugged all this aside. She'd been happier than ever before while living here at Chelsea Palace with the lord admiral and his wife. And even though the atmosphere was charged at times with uneasiness, that was all that mattered for the present.

"Well, what now, Your Grace?"

It was Seymour back again, fully dressed, gaily handsome, self-confident as ever. Elizabeth rose instantly. Her toilet completed, she wore a plain black gown and a close-fitting black cap, for she was still in mourning for her father.

"A brisk ride before breakfast, or practice at the butts?" Seymour asked.

"A brisk ride," Elizabeth decided, "but first I must make my peace with my stepmother."

"Small need for that, Your Grace. Catherine's fully ashamed and sends you a score of apologies. A bout of sickness on rising caused the crossness. My good wife, God bless her, is clearly with child."

"My congratulations to both of you," Elizabeth said stiffly and wondered why she felt so upset by this news.

They went out to the stables, mounted their horses, and rode forth unattended in the cheek-tingling crispness of the March morning. The brisk ride by the river became, as usual, a race which Elizabeth, as usual, won by a narrow margin. Presently, tired of riding, she flung herself from her horse and lay panting on the riverbank. Seymour, having tethered both horses in the shade of a tree, squatted on his haunches at her side and with a blade of grass began to tickle her nose. Elizabeth dashed his hand aside and sat up.

"Seymour, I want to ask you a question."

"An' a serious one, by the sound of it!"

"Serious enough, and for once I insist on seriousness," she said imperiously. "Tell me this: why, when my father died, did you try to snare me in marriage?"

Seymour chuckled heartily. "Snare—a good word, that! Why? Because, in his will, King Harry placed you third in succession." He chuckled again. "And why did you spurn me?"

"For the same reason, surely!"

"Yet in your scholarly letter of refusal Your Grace merely said that you had neither the years nor the inclination to think of marriage, that your time was wholly taken up with weeping for the death of your father, that in any case you proposed, on reaching the years of discretion, to retain your complete liberty. Your Grace bids fair already to attaining a lively statesmanship."

"That," the girl said gravely, "is certainly my aim."

But *third* in succession, she was thinking—a sore point, that, when one wanted, when one had always wanted, to mount the throne. She was second in the line of succession, now, of course, but for all she knew, much further removed than that. If Edward died without issue, then Mary; and finally, only if *she* died without issue—

"My nephew the king," Seymour remarked lightly, as if reading her thoughts, "is a sickly boy. It will surprise nobody if he fails to reach manhood."

Elizabeth looked at him indignantly. "It grieves me to hear you speak like that, Seymour. You know how deeply I love Edward."

"So deeply that you'd rather he lived, married, had children and thus denied you all chance of ascending the throne?"

"I'd rather die myself than gain the throne that way!"

"There are other ways, of course," Seymour murmured, as if confiding solely in himself. "As for the Lady Mary," he added, before Elizabeth could make any comment, "sour creature that she is, she'll make a queenly marriage of convenience, if the throne is ever hers—God help England if that happens!—and do her best to produce a brood of children as fanatical as herself. Your real danger lies in that quarter, if events follow unchallenged the course set by your father."

Elizabeth had seized upon four words: "there are other ways"; now she pondered the word *unchallenged*. They were words, all five of them, which in troubled England spelled yet another word, and that was *treason*. She uttered it in a whisper.

Seymour laughed carelessly. "Treason today is likely enough

to be virtue tomorrow. It all depends on who holds the reins."

"Would it have been treason, the marriage you wanted with me?"

"By God it would, in the eyes of my brother, the lord protector!"

She looked at him admiringly. "You were willing to risk your head!"

"A fair enough risk, Your Grace. As the husband of one as close to the throne as you, I would have been reasonably safe."

She looked at him again and not so admiringly. He'd been ready to gamble his head, yet in gambling it, use her to keep it on his shoulders. Still he was a bold one, this Thomas Seymour, and boldness had an immense appeal. Quickly she stilled the excited beating of her heart; there was another question she wanted to ask.

"Seymour, why did you turn from me and marry my father's widow?"

"I had the impression it was *you* who turned from *me*," he said drily. "Catherine and I had already talked of marriage before your father's greedy eyes fell upon her. He sent me on a mission abroad. When I returned she was the new queen. King Harry had issued an order; Catherine was forced to obey. His death cleared the way for us again."

Elizabeth looked at him doubtfully. "Was that the whole of your reason?"

Seymour grinned broadly. "Catherine is a rich woman."

"You have money of your own."

"I needed more."

"For what purpose, Seymour?"

"Money is a power in itself," he replied, "and then, too, I had another reason for marrying Catherine. You were in her care, and this brought us under the same roof at Chelsea Palace. Nevertheless, I think you hated my marriage at first."

"I certainly thought the haste of it indecent."

"And regarded it, perhaps, as an insult to yourself?"

"Perhaps!"

"Yet you remained at Chelsea."

"I'd have been lonely elsewhere," Elizabeth said, her voice unsteady, "and I love my stepmother dearly."

"And now, knowing your stepmother's husband better," Seymour questioned, head on one side, "you even love him a little? As you would love a brother, say? Or—" his eyes were twinkling irresistibly—"or rather, as a kindly uncle, since he's more than twice your age?"

Elizabeth laughed merrily. She was a girl again, not the grown woman of experience and insight she had been trying to be.

"As a kindly uncle!" she cried.

Seymour jumped up and dragged her to her feet, and held her for a moment in a light embrace.

"We've talked enough," he said, his lips on her brow.

"But left important questions unanswered."

"There'll be answers aplenty when the right time comes."

Elizabeth clung to him. "Make sure it *is* the *right* time, whatever your plans and aims. For my heart would break if one false step should lead my kindly uncle to the block."

Chapter 2

She woke fighting for breath. In the dark bedchamber the very stillness of the air emphasized the horror which held her fast. It was the old recurring nightmare, the nightmare which she had thought dispelled forever by the happiness of life at Chelsea. She recognized it by the heaviness of her limbs, the haziness of her mind, in which only the nameless, formless bogey was clearly defined. She tried to sit up, to cry out for help; the pain of trying was excruciating.

She struggled helplessly for control, as she had done many times in the past. It was a matter of telling oneself that the spasm would pass, that it was a bad dream, no more. Say it out loud, "A bad dream, no more!" There was no danger, nothing to fear. The bogey had no real existence, even though it hovered over her menacingly, darker than the darkness of the room.

She forced herself to keep her eyes open. It was still there, swooping closer, so much closer than ever before, and it was assuming this time a definite shape. There were arms; she

could sense them. There were hands and steel-like fingers; she could feel them on her shoulders. She tried to scream but no sound came; the scream was a seering pain deep in her chest.

"Your Grace, wake up—wake up!"

So it had a voice, too, yet magically a quite familiar voice.

"You ate a heavy supper, you greedy wretch," the voice laughed.

She was being shaken now and the fingers biting into her shoulders had an ever-increasing warmth.

"Poor Bess, was it a very bad nightmare?"

She found herself laughing and sobbing at the same time.

"The kindly uncle," she giggled. "Not the horrible bogey, after all."

She flung herself into Seymour's arms, taking comfort from the warmth of his body. She could feel and hear the steady beating of his heart, and that too was comforting.

"I was on my way to bed," he told her. "I sat up late at cards. I heard you cry out. The eerie noise made my hair stand on end."

"It was the old nightmare," Elizabeth said. "I thought I'd outgrown it." Her teeth were chattering idiotically. "I didn't have a heavy supper. I'm not a greedy wretch. There's always been the nightmare, the bogey, always, always!"

"What manner of bogey?" Seymour asked soothingly.

"A horrible shapeless mass, a sort of man, I think."

Seymour chuckled deeply. "Sounds to me remarkably like the late King Harry."

A picture of her father's vast bulky form, lunging this way and that on uncertain legs, crossed Elizabeth's mind. A vague stirring of memory carried her back to an earlier nightmare. There was a beard, a heavy flushed face, a gross stomach.

"How stupid of you," she said. "One doesn't have nightmares about people one loves."

"You hated your father."

"You go too far, Seymour! I loved him dearly. I tried to model myself upon him. I still try."

"You loved him, yes, but you hated him as well," Seymour insisted. "You hated him, even though the hatred was lost as memory faded."

"I never hated him, never!"

She tore herself from his arms and sat back in the bed, well out of his reach.

"Dear little Bess, he sent your mother to the block. You hated him for that. You feared him too, perhaps."

"She deserved it. She was unfaithful. She did unspeakable things. Not only ordinary lovers, but her brother as well."

Seymour sat on the edge of the bed. "I very much doubt that charge. Your mother's big sin was her inability to give birth to a living son. She was doomed on that account alone. There were accusations. There had to be. And the law accepted them. The law, after all, was Harry of England."

"But Seymour—"

"However, that's not our immediate concern," he went on. "This nightmare, now. I think I'm beginning to understand it. You modeled yourself upon your father? Of course you did! You began in the first place by imitating him, mimicking his walk, the way he used to strut and at the same time stumble. I saw you at it once. That was a momentous day, by God it was! While you were stumping after your father, a mischievous grin on your face, a queen was mounting the scaffold. Harry turned and saw you, and swept you into his arms. How old were you then? Not yet three. You asked where your mother was. He scowled, the same Tudor scowl that clouds your own face on occasion, and flung you from him. Your nurse, a silly creature, picked you up and babbled—not in your father's hearing, I grant you—that you'd never see your mother again. 'Your father has chopped off her head,' she told you. I was close enough to see your face. The look on it filled me with compassion, and I'm not as a rule a compassionate man. And I heard your piping voice. 'I hate him, hate him, hate him!' you sobbed."

Soberly Elizabeth said, "Surely my voice was never piping."

The memory came back, more clearly now; the beard, the heavy flushed face, the gross stomach. She held it unhappily for a moment.

"You're making up a stupid story," she said stubbornly.

Seymour moved closer and took her hands in his. She let them rest there, drawing from his touch a comforting warmth that all but set her purring like a kitten. A stupid story, yet its very stupidity had brought a heavenly release.

"Your father was free to marry again," Seymour went on, "and marry again he did, seven days later. When you heard about it you must have wondered and wondered, your childish mind confused and unhappy. At that time you ceased to be a princess and became merely the Lady Elizabeth. You were declared illegitimate, excluded from the succession. A bastard you were, by the law of England, Harry's law—"

"He put me back in the succession before he died!" Elizabeth interrupted quickly.

"But left you illegitimate," Seymour pointed out and added lightly, "and illegitimate you'll remain, unless somebody some day changes the law."

"Somebody, some day . . ." Elizabeth echoed.

"Later," Seymour went on relentlessly, "unkind people taunted you with the word 'bastard,' and though by then you had been told of your mother's alleged infamy, the hatred of your father must have become deep-seated. Thrust out, of course, but there all the time, if only in the nightmares."

"A stupid story," Elizabeth tried to insist, but the heavenly release was more pronounced than ever.

"When did you have the first nightmare?" Seymour asked sharply.

"I can't remember. I've always had them."

"But not before your mother's execution, I'll vow."

"Perhaps, yet I still love my father."

"Naturally. You're a part of him, and that's the part you love." In the darkness Seymour took her gently in his arms. "I do pray, Bess, that the unhappiness of your childhood won't ever mar the splendid promise of the future."

Bess . . . He'd called her that often enough as the intimacy of their friendship had deepened, but never with the same tender inflection as tonight. He was sorry for her, of course, and eager to comfort her; that was why he was holding her so gently now. She sighed contentedly and relaxed against him, and had the craziest feeling that she was holding him, not he her. He was comforting her, but she knew, with excitement rising in her breast, that in some strange female way she could comfort him even more. She brushed her lips against his, then pushed him away.

"It's high time that the kindly uncle went off to his own bed," she said shakily.

"Yes," Seymour laughed, "otherwise he might, in some people's eyes, become the wicked uncle, and that would never do."

"Never," Elizabeth asserted as firmly as she could.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth woke refreshed, her mind instantly alert and full of thoughts about Thomas Seymour. She flung back the bed curtains and looked with delight at the bar of May sunshine now streaming through the window. She had slept dreamlessly since Seymour had left her last night. Soon, she thought, he'd come bounding in for the morning romp, Catherine close on his heels. There'd been no hint of harshness since that single outburst, though sometimes—looking back Elizabeth was acutely aware of it now—there was a veiled look in Catherine's eyes.

She clasped her arms round her knees and stared dreamily at the window. It was funny, she thought, that last night should have brought her a new awareness of people, of life itself. In a way it made her dread Seymour's imminent appearance. She had a feeling she could never again engage in a childish game with him; at least, not without embarrassment. To wrestle with him, squirming like an eel in his arms—no, she didn't think she could do that now, certainly not with Catherine looking on. What, she asked herself hotly, has happened to me since last night? She remembered many of the things Seymour had said, but in particular she dwelt on the parting words, the suggestion that the kindly uncle might become a wicked uncle. What he had meant by that was all too clear, now.

The door swung open, but it was Catherine, not her husband, who stood on the threshold. A very grim-looking Catherine, too, Elizabeth was quick to notice.

"I want to talk to you," Catherine said in a flat, quite lifeless voice.

She closed the door behind her and came slowly toward the

bed. Her movements were clumsy. She was fully but untidily dressed. Her appearance suggested that if she had slept at all last night she had slept in her clothes. Her eyes, Elizabeth saw, were red-rimmed and her cheeks blotchy.

"Arrangements are being made for you to leave Chelsea," she went on woodenly. "You have your own establishment here, your governess, your tutor, your private treasurer, your maids and pages and a score of other servants. You'll go elsewhere with them. Cheshunt will do. The manor house there is as good a place as any."

"Whose orders are these?" Elizabeth asked angrily. "The lord protector's?"

"If the decision were left to him," Catherine snapped, life coming violently to her voice, "it wouldn't be Cheshunt but the Tower, and by way of Traitor's Gate, more than likely. No, the orders are mine."

Elizabeth said the first thing that came into her mind. "Send for Seymour. He, I'm sure, won't allow this nonsense!"

Catherine laughed harshly. "Thomas, for once, has shown a bit of good sense. He's gone to London, to the town house. He'll stay there till you leave Chelsea."

Elizabeth all but wept with rage.

"What have I done to displease you?" she demanded.

"This brazen attitude does you no credit," Catherine said bitterly. "Thomas was seen leaving your room late last night. How many times has he been here before and left unnoticed? How long do I have to wait to discover that you, like me, are with child by the gallant lord admiral?"

Appalled, Elizabeth said in a whisper, "Your Grace is out of your mind."

"I was, once, to permit the horseplay, or what I *thought* was horseplay, to continue for months. But not any more, Elizabeth, not any more."

Elizabeth looked at her stepmother without anger now and felt, to her immense surprise, a deep compassion. She felt it, she admitted joyously, because the crazy jealousy of the woman had given a deeper meaning to her new awareness of the world around her. False as the charge was, it might well have been actual fact, had full realization come last night instead of this

morning. I, the Lady Elizabeth, she told herself gloatingly, am in love with my stepmother's husband. It was a delicious thought, even though it carried with it a twinge of conscience.

"You seem so sure," she said softly, "that Seymour and I are lovers." Lovers! How grand it sounded, how daring! "Did he actually admit it, Your Grace?"

"He denied it, told me some silly story about a nightmare."

"I have nightmares often, and well you know it. Seymour heard my distress and came to pacify me. He was kind and gentle, and I loved him for it."

Doubt crossed Catherine's face for the first time; she touched her brow wearily.

Elizabeth went on quickly, "I can't believe that Seymour agreed to this plan of yours and went willingly to London."

"He went, and that's the main thing."

"You spoke of the lord protector," Elizabeth went on, her mind amazingly active. "And the Tower, and Traitor's Gate. You drove Seymour away with threats. Yes, that's it, it must be!"

Catherine touched her brow wearily again. "I admit I acted drastically, but I had to. For his sake and yours. There was more in it than jealousy. I was driven, too, by a horrible fear. I love my husband, and I love you, too, child."

"Child!" Elizabeth scoffed.

Calmer now, Catherine sat on the bed. "At times you look like a woman, you even talk and act like one, but in many ways, my poor Elizabeth, you are still a child."

Elizabeth refused to listen. "You threatened to tell the lord protector that Seymour and I were lovers. Is that the truth?"

"Yes."

"Why should Seymour fear such an accusation?"

Catherine shuddered violently. "The lord protector would seize any opportunity to bring a bill of attainder against Thomas. A charge of seduction would be sufficient."

"But his own brother!"

"There's no love lost between them. The Duke of Somerset, lord protector of England, has always feared that Thomas would try to oust him from that high office."

"Well, what of it?" Elizabeth chuckled.

"Oh, child, child!" Catherine exclaimed. "How little you understand the dangers which surround us all! Living in isola-

tion as you do, you know nothing of the state of affairs except through gossip. With the king but a child, England is torn by intrigue. The lord protector rules us all, yet knows his position to be a shaky one. He uses any means in his power to bring his enemies to the block. And his most dangerous enemy is Thomas."

Only half listening, Elizabeth said, "If you really loved your husband you'd never have carried out your threat."

"I convinced him that I would."

Elizabeth thought shrewdly, he must have known that she wouldn't, therefore he left of his own accord. I wonder why? But this thought had a sobering effect. She might be in love with Seymour, but he was hardly in love with her, otherwise he wouldn't have deserted her like this. Confused and unhappy, she masked her feelings with a show of spirit.

"It would serve you right," she said jauntily, "if your jealous accusations were true."

"I've no proof to the contrary!" Catherine snapped angrily.

"Call a physician, have him examine me!" Elizabeth taunted daringly.

"There's gossip already; do you want it increased a hundred-fold?" Beside herself with rage, Catherine seized Elizabeth by the shoulders. "I can get my proof without recourse to any physician!"

Elizabeth, having spoken in sheer bravado, was suddenly frightened at the intensity of Catherine's anger. Worse, she was filled with a strange loathing and disgust. Nevertheless she laughed as scornfully as she could.

"Proof of what?" she demanded. "My innocence or my guilt? Aren't you afraid of what you might find?"

"Still a child!" Catherine sneered. "Yet you're woman enough when it comes to maliciousness."

Elizabeth nodded solemnly to herself. A woman in love knew the full meaning of malice.

Catherine was actually grappling with her now, and Elizabeth found resistance impossible. Presently Catherine released her and stood back, sighing deeply. Forcing herself to look at her stepmother, the girl saw tears in the woman's eyes and a curious expression on her face.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Elizabeth asked hotly.

Catherine nodded slowly. "I can vouch for your innocence. You've never known a man that way, and if you never do, what of it?" The curious expression was still on her face. "Men, that way and many other ways, bring a woman nothing but trouble."

Elizabeth ignored this. "Do you still insist on my moving to Cheshunt?"

Catherine seemed not to hear. "I went too far," she said quietly. "My jealous accusations . . . Yes, I was jealous all the time, jealous always when I watched you wrestling with Thomas. I'm thirty-four, and that's old for a woman when she sees a high-spirited girl in her husband's arms. Please forgive me if you can. One thing I promise, your secret is in safe-keeping."

Elizabeth tossed her head. "Who wants to make a secret of innocence?"

"Innocence is a precious possession," Catherine said evasively. "I might have been happier if I'd never lost mine. I urge you to keep yours, remain happy."

"Nonsense!" Elizabeth scoffed and repeated: "Do you still insist on my going to Cheshunt?"

"After this morning, could things ever be the same between us?" Catherine asked sadly.

"Never!" Elizabeth agreed.

"Cheshunt it is, then, if only for your own protection."

They held each other's eyes for a long moment. Catherine's were the first to soften. She made a quick move, as if to take Elizabeth in her arms, but the girl turned swiftly from her.

"I've loved you as if you were my own daughter," Catherine said.

"And I've loved you as if you were my own mother," Elizabeth conceded.

"Men are a curse," Catherine sighed.

Elizabeth laughed knowingly. "Say rather, a woman's feelings for a man are a curse."

"Then in future, for God's sake watch your feelings!"

When Catherine had gone, Mrs. Ashley, the girl's governess, came bustling into the room. The wife of one of Elizabeth's Boleyn relations, she was fussily conscious at all times of the responsibility of her position. For a while she prattled excit-

edly about the preparations which, under Catherine's instructions, were already advanced; then she dropped her voice to a confidential whisper.

"To have a house entirely to oneself—that will be splendid, Your Grace."

"Splendid," Elizabeth agreed heartily. She had not thought of that before.

"I trust," Mrs. Ashley wheezed, "that I shall not be too stern in the exercise of my complete authority."

"Whose house is it to be, mine or yours?" Elizabeth asked haughtily.

"Yours, Your Grace, dear me yes!"

"Then we need have no talk of sternness, Ashley."

"Indeed no! The Lady Elizabeth will be sole mistress at Cheshunt. And just think, what a delight to be able to pick and choose one's guests, even those who may come secretly."

"Secretly?"

Mrs. Ashley's eyes flashed slyly. "There'll be at least one, I suspect."

Elizabeth reflected that Ashley was one of Seymour's greatest admirers. He always flattered her outrageously and never failed to get her giggling.

"Is a first secret visit planned already?" Elizabeth asked casually.

"Who knows, Your Grace, who knows? One thing is, however, certain. The kindly uncle, like a sure-footed cat in the night, can find his way anywhere."

"Is that a message you were charged to give me?"

"It would seem so," the silly woman chortled. "Dear me yes!"

Chapter 4

They met hurriedly in a secluded part of the grounds of the manor house at Cheshunt. It was dusk, and Mrs. Ashley, who had led Elizabeth out to the rendezvous, hovered close by but beyond earshot, a not too watchful chaperon.

"I've missed you, Seymour," Elizabeth said breathlessly.

"And I, you, dear Bess."

"It's been a long separation."

"Three weeks to the day," Seymour murmured.

"And each as long as a year. I swear I'm three years older!"

"In this light, sweetheart, you look it."

Sweetheart! She longed for him to take her in his arms, but since he made no move, his eyes straying beyond her to Mrs. Ashley, she stood straight and slim before him, making no move herself.

During the three weeks at Cheshunt Elizabeth had felt more cut off than ever before in her life. She had heard nothing of what was happening in London, not even through gossip. Letters had been exchanged with her half brother, the king, but in her own, though she had wanted to, she had made no mention of Seymour, knowing that whatever she wrote would be read by the lord protector. Even to have written simply "My greetings to your Uncle Thomas" would have been viewed with suspicion. For the rest, lessons had been tedious; they'd reminded her that in part she was still a schoolgirl. She supposed some progress had been made, for her tutor, a man not given to enthusiasm, had praised her work. She smiled reminiscently. He had of course not seen the paper on which, in French and Italian, Spanish and even German, she had written "Thomas Seymour, I love you, love you, love you." Nor had he seen the poem she'd written, a sonnet in which, gropingly, she had tried to express her feelings.

"How do you come here this night," she asked Seymour—"as the kindly uncle, or as the wicked one?"

"The wicked one, for sure!" he laughed.

Her heart missed a beat; she took a quick step toward him.

"Seymour—" she faltered.

He laughed again. "The wicked one because my heart is full of treason."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks grow red. It was treason, of course, that Thomas Seymour should approach with amorous intent the girl who, as things stood, was second in succession to the throne.

"You left Chelsea of your own accord, even though Catherine made certain threats," she said, delaying in an agony of delight the delicious moment for which she longed. "Why did you do that?"

"To throw dust in Catherine's eyes, you shrewd one. To let her think she has more power over me than she really does. But there's little time for talk tonight, Bess. Coming here was a risky business."

Talk! Who wanted talk? She moved closer still, her heart beating high, her face a ball of fire, so hotly did her cheeks burn. Seymour placed his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her intently.

"Important questions were left unanswered, you said that once. I promised you answers aplenty when the right time came. It's time now, for at least one answer."

"What answer?" she asked.

"We'd talked of Edward and how he stood between you and the throne. You'd rather die yourself than gain the throne through his death. You said that, remember?"

"I remember. And you told me there were other ways."

"Well, sweet Bess, Edward can be dethroned."

"You plan a revolt, Seymour!"

"It is better to plan a revolt than to wait helplessly for my brother to strike first. I mean Edward no harm. He can be dethroned without hurt to his person. Are you with me, Bess? And will you be ready to mount the throne, when I give the word?"

Seymour's voice, charged with suppressed excitement, found a quick response in Elizabeth's breast. She felt his fingers digging into her shoulders.

"Give me your answer," he whispered. "Remember, you have as much right to the throne as Edward."

"There would still be Mary, placed before me in my father's will," Elizabeth pointed out.

"Easy enough to set aside the will, once my brother is out of the way. And who, in your father's Protestant England, wants the Catholic Lady Mary?"

"There are still more Catholics in England than Protestants, or so my tutor tells me."

"So much the worse for you, then, if the Lady Mary ever ascends the throne!"

Elizabeth recalled what he'd said about the lord protector, "It is better to plan a revolt than to wait helplessly for my brother to strike first." She remembered, too, Catherine's very real fear of what the lord protector might do.

"Your answer, Bess, your answer!" Seymour urged.

"I'm with you, of course I am!" she cried eagerly. "But I do beg you to move with the utmost care."

"The utmost care, I promise you that, but all possible speed. The sooner I can bend the knee and call you Majesty, the better I'll like it."

He told her then that he had the nucleus of a force at his disposal already, and upon that nucleus would build an army sufficient for his needs. He kissed her on the brow—the kiss of a kindly uncle, that, no more—murmured that he'd visit her again when possible, and swung away from her in the gathering gloom.

Elizabeth sighed as she saw the last of him, a dark shadow lost in the darker shadow of the trees. If he loved her at all, she thought, it was as a woman set apart, a future ruler, the queen's majesty. It was an inspiring thought, but nonetheless a sad one.

Chapter 5

"A girl, a healthy, bouncing little daughter," Mrs. Ashley gushed, all of a twitter at the news which had just reached Cheshunt from Chelsea Palace. "Your Grace must write at once offering the lord admiral and his lady your kindest felicitations."

Looking up from her lessons, Elizabeth scowled like Henry, her father. She knew it was churlish to feel resentment, but feel it she did, just as she'd felt it all those months ago when Seymour had told her that Catherine was with child. She hadn't

known the reason for her resentment then, but knew it well enough now, and took no pleasure from the knowledge. To understand oneself, her tutor was fond of saying, was more important at times than to understand others, but she felt today that the less one knew about oneself the better it was for one's peace of mind.

"If Your Grace is unwilling to write," Mrs. Ashley went on, "I will be happy to do it for you."

"Well, why not? You're more capable than I of sentimental letter writing." Elizabeth said sarcastically, and returned to her lessons.

Now, on the eve of her fifteenth birthday, she had developed what Mrs. Ashley called a good if somewhat small bust. She had also outgrown her strength, Mrs. Ashley asserted, for she was thin these days rather than merely becomingly slim, and her black eyes were just a little too prominent. Elizabeth herself preferred to think that unrequited love, rather than the fact that she had outgrown her strength, was responsible for the thinness.

She had seen Seymour only twice since his first secret visit. It was distressing to have learned from him that men on whom he had counted were hanging back, and alarming to suspect from his manner that he might make a rash move before being certain of sufficient support. Meanwhile he had gained the confidence of the boy king, chiefly by making young Edward secret presents of money, for the lord protector was something of a skinflint in the matter of the king's personal allowance. And this, when Elizabeth permitted herself to look at the matter squarely, seemed unscrupulous, since Edward was in the end to be dethroned.

Lessons were still tedious, and she concentrated on them halfheartedly. No longer was she able, as earlier, to lose herself in the works of Cicero, or take pleasure from translating into English the passages of her Greek New Testament. Yet in spite of this, having a natural bent for study, her brain had functioned quite apart from her troubled heart, and her tutor had been more pleased with her than ever.

"Ashley," she said sharply, "I'll write the letter myself."

"And offer, perhaps, to become the infant's godmother?"

"Never!" Elizabeth said icily.

"It would please the lord admiral," Mrs. Ashley wheedled.

"I'm concerned only with pleasing myself."

"Gracious heaven, we *are* in a pet!"

Elizabeth wrote a formal letter and received a reply so full of gratitude that she was instantly ashamed of her own stilted phrases. Catherine ended on a serious note. She had no means of knowing, she wrote, what her husband was plotting now, but that he was plotting something she was more than certain. She begged Elizabeth not to become involved in any wild scheme, or at least to keep her own counsel and practice in the presence of others the greatest circumspection. The lord protector, Catherine concluded, had spies everywhere, perhaps even among Elizabeth's own servants, or for that matter, Seymour's.

Remembering how deeply she had once loved her stepmother, Elizabeth wrote another letter in which she hinted, as broadly as her pride would permit, that the time had come for a reconciliation, and in which she begged permission to journey to Chelsea for the purpose of seeing the baby. When no reply came within a week, Elizabeth began to feel angry with herself for showing such weakness.

Two days later, a matter of ten days in all since the birth of the baby, a messenger arrived from Chelsea. He was one of Seymour's valets, a youth by the name of Edwards. Arriving while Elizabeth was at dinner, he was brought before her in the dining hall and fell instantly to his knees. From his face she suspected at once that he brought by no means pleasant news.

"Your Grace," he stammered, "I am charged by my master to convey to you the saddest of tidings. Her Majesty the Dowager Queen, after a brief illness, lies dead at Chelsea Palace."

There were three others at table with Elizabeth; Mrs. Ashley, Thomas Parry, the treasurer, and William Grindal, the tutor. Mrs. Ashley set up an instant wailing, and the two men bowed their heads, while the servants who stood close by echoed the governess' cries of distress. Elizabeth herself looked at Edwards in silent disbelief. Catherine dead—it wasn't possible!

Mrs. Ashley controlled herself. "Of what did the poor creature die?"

"High fever, madam."

Mrs. Ashley turned to Elizabeth. "Your Grace must send at once a message of sympathy to the poor lord admiral."

Elizabeth hesitated. She had a feeling that the valet Edwards was watching her far too closely; indeed, it seemed to her that everyone in the room was studying her sharply. Everyone, she reflected, knew the reason for the rift between her and Catherine, for gossip had got about and had been enlarged upon. Was Edwards thinking, as he stared at her, the way is now clear for the lord admiral and the Lady Elizabeth? Horribly enough, the thought was entirely her own; it had slipped unbidden into her mind. She gazed as calmly as she could at Edwards and remembered Catherine's warning; he, for all she knew, could be one of the lord protector's spies.

"As you wish," she told Mrs. Ashley airily, "but I doubt if Seymour is in need of sympathy from me." Too late she realized that a double meaning could be read into the words, and with all the contempt she could summon up added swiftly, "He was not the best of husbands."

Seymour himself came to Cheshunt a week later. He came openly, attended by a large train of followers, openly because, as he announced in the presence of the whole household, he had a communication to convey to the Lady Elizabeth concerning the administration of his late wife's estate. He then suggested that he should discuss the details in private with Elizabeth and Mrs. Ashley.

"If you judge it necessary, my lord," Elizabeth said haughtily.

The three of them retired to Elizabeth's study and, at a nod from Seymour, Mrs. Ashley withdrew to an inner room.

"And so, as far as the world is concerned," Seymour told Elizabeth, "we are quite adequately chaperoned. However, I'm still too heavy with sorrow to dwell at length on Catherine's affairs. At any rate, she willed you some valuable pieces of jewelry."

"You neither sound nor look like a man heavy with sorrow," Elizabeth said sharply.

"A most uncharitable remark," he chuckled.

Unsteadily she said, "You married my stepmother after I rejected you. And now once again do you propose to pay court to me?"

"Ah, how cleverly you read my mind!"

Miserably she whispered, "The way is now clear."

Seymour took her instantly in his arms and kissed her. It was not by any means the kiss of a kindly uncle, and submitting to it, losing herself in this rapture for which she had waited so long, it seemed to Elizabeth that the world now held only two people, a man called Thomas Seymour and a girl, Elizabeth Tudor.

"Sweet Bess," Seymour murmured, "dearly would I love to be the husband of the future queen."

Chapter 6

It was another brief visit, one of the few (the all too few, Elizabeth thought) since Catherine's death four months ago. The rendezvous was in the same secluded part of the garden, with Mrs. Ashley, as usual, standing by at a distance, ready to give the alarm should anyone approach in the darkness. Elizabeth drew her cloak close about her, for the January night, though clear and brilliantly starlit, was bitterly cold.

"One thing is damnably obvious," Seymour said, "marriage is impossible—you being a minor—while my brother rules the roost."

Elizabeth was miserably obliged to agree, for Mrs. Ashley, her governess, was directly responsible to the lord protector. Worse, this unbearable tyrant, having heard gossip about plans for a secret marriage, had warned her that he alone, when the right time came, would find her a husband acceptable to the council of regency. He had also asked her curtly, through her treasurer, Thomas Parry, if there was any truth in the gossip, and Elizabeth, through Parry, had replied shrewdly, she thought, that she dealt not in gossip. She was aware, she had added, of the limitations placed upon her and would never

marry without the consent of England's lord protector who, she trusted, was in this respect, if no other, her own particular protector as well.

Seymour laughed shortly. "However, there's good reason to believe that my brother won't rule the roost much longer. He's much less secure since the failure of his war in Scotland."

This was true enough. The failure had been a blow to English prestige, and the escape to France of Mary Stuart, the child queen of Scotland, had made the lord protector a laughing-stock in some quarters. To his further annoyance, Seymour had spoken up in public about the waste of money caused by the Scottish venture and had been roundly if discreetly applauded.

"I half expected never to lay eyes on you again," Elizabeth said, thinking of the risk Seymour had taken in openly opposing his brother. "My relief when I saw you approach just now nearly reduced me to tears."

"Ah, but I have even better news," Seymour cried and seemed to her to be boasting rashly. "I tested my position again and am still at liberty. I was ordered to join the fleet—a neat trick to get me out of the way—but I appointed a deputy and told my brother that my real place was at the admiralty. He then commanded me to appear before the council and explain my conduct. I replied that the only way he'd get me there was by force." He laughed scornfully. "No force has yet been employed. I'm confident that I can strike now, using force of my own, with every hope of success. Why, when next I come to Cheshunt my purpose will surely be to take you back to London in triumph!"

"It sounds like a dream," Elizabeth exclaimed breathlessly.

"The thing to do with dreams, dear Bess, is turn them into sweet reality. And that I'll do in a matter of a week or two. I now have ten thousand men at my disposal and enough money to keep them in the field for a month, if necessary. Holt Castle is at my command, fully provisioned and fortified, and two cannon foundries are working for me day and night, working, did the men but know it, in the name of Queen Elizabeth."

"And that of her consort too!" Elizabeth added eagerly.

Seymour swept her into a swift embrace. "Think of it, Bess!

In next to no time I'll have the authority to ask my own permission to marry you. 'Seymour,' I'll say, 'have I your gracious permission to take the Lady Elizabeth as wife and bed down with her snugly at Whitehall?' Vastly amusing, isn't it!"

A moment later he was gone, a gallant, excited figure striding boldly into the night, his laughter echoing in the darkness.

"Dear heaven," Elizabeth sobbed, "I can scarcely wait!"

Chapter 7

"Master Parry," Mrs. Ashley remarked, "is late returning from London."

She and Elizabeth were busy at their needlework, Elizabeth for her part working on a finely embroidered shirt for her half brother Edward. A present, she thought grimly, for a king whose days on the throne are numbered.

"I do trust," Mrs. Ashley added, "that nothing serious has detained the man."

Parry had journeyed to London for the purpose of conferring with the lord protector about Elizabeth's private allowance. An unnecessary journey, for sure, since the lord protector would soon be overthrown; but with no word from Seymour during the last week, Elizabeth was hoping that Parry might gain information of his movements at Whitehall.

"More than likely the lord protector will question Master Parry again about Your Grace's relations with the lord admiral," Mrs. Ashley went on. "Heaven be praised that I alone am aware of the secret visits."

Elizabeth looked at her governess with distaste. The silly creature was in a garrulous mood and likely to grow arch withal as she prattled on and on.

"To be young and tenderly lovesick—what a delicious experience!" she cried.

"Seymour is neither young nor tenderly lovesick," Elizabeth said acidly.

"So much older than Your Grace, that I admit, but with

Your Grace a grown woman in all but years, with an old head on your shoulders, and with the lord admiral, dear man, so young in heart—what an excellent match. And not a marriage of convenience, mind you, but a love match, heaven bless us all!”

“Enough, for pity’s sake!” Elizabeth said sharply. “This talk of marriage with Seymour sickens me. You base your assumption on nothing but gossip.”

“And the secret visits,” the governess chortled.

Elizabeth looked at her searchingly. Once again she had remembered Catherine’s warning. Was this twittering busybody an enemy trying to discover her innermost thoughts and report them to the lord protector? “Have I ever spoken of marriage with Seymour?” she asked quickly. “Or even uttered the word love?”

Mrs. Ashley smiled slyly.

To Elizabeth’s relief Thomas Parry arrived at that moment, thus stemming the flow of Mrs. Ashley’s irritating chatter. It was, however, a short-lived relief, for it was clear that he had ridden hard from London, and in considerable agitation.

“Your Grace,” he gasped at once, “I bring the worst of bad news. The lord admiral has been arrested and thrown into the Tower.”

Steadying herself with difficulty, Elizabeth drew her needle through the fine linen of the shirt.

“Why is it the worst of bad news?” she asked quietly. “The lord admiral and his brother have been enemies for many a month.”

“Your Grace,” Parry stammered, “there’s talk already of a bill of attainder.”

Elizabeth looked him boldly in the face. “Simply because, according to gossip, the lord admiral aspires to my hand in marriage? What nonsense!”

“Your Grace, there’s another charge, the lord admiral is accused of planning a marriage between His Majesty the King and the Lady Jane Grey.”

Elizabeth looked as startled as she felt. A marriage between Edward and Jane, both of them eleven years old? And planned by Seymour? A ridiculous charge, surely! Jane, a great-grand-

daughter of Henry VII, had been named by Elizabeth's father as fourth in the line of succession. Next, in short, after Elizabeth herself, if Elizabeth mounted the throne and died without issue. A *ridiculous* charge?

The child Jane had been for a time in Catherine Seymour's care, and on Catherine's death had become, with her father's consent, Thomas Seymour's legal ward. Elizabeth had given not a thought to this at the time, but asked herself now why Seymour should have wanted Jane, if not to use her for his own ends.

And only now did she begin to grasp the significance of the plan. Sickly as Edward was, there was no real reason for believing that he would not reach manhood. Nor was there real reason for believing that, if married to Jane, he would not have children in the years to come. Elizabeth felt a great dismay rising in her breast. Seymour and his vaunting promise to make her queen, his pressing desire to be the queen's husband! He must have seen all along, as she herself saw too late now, that to overthrow the lord protector, dethrone Edward and set her on the throne, would be to risk a rising in favor, either of Edward, or Edward's legal successor, Mary. All along Seymour must have planned, after overthrowing the lord protector, to keep Edward on the throne. Thus, with Edward married to Jane, he would have had a sure hold on England during Edward's minority.

Elizabeth tried desperately to steady herself. If, in addition, he had really intended marriage with herself, he had intended it only as a means of binding himself closer to the throne, though more than likely as a means of keeping her inactive in the background. To her horror, she felt hot tears spring to her eyes. She lowered her head quickly and with an unsteady hand resumed the work on Edward's shirt. They were tears of anger, she tried to tell herself, not tears of self-pity. And besides—she grasped eagerly at this new thought—the charge against Seymour had yet to be proved.

At this juncture Mrs. Ashley emitted a great wailing cry.

"Blessed heaven, Your Grace, we are all in danger now!"

This had a steadying effect on Elizabeth. "Nonsense, Ashley! Neither you nor I nor Parry have conspired with Seymour, and

I, as all must know, would never want to see the king married to Jane Grey. A ridiculous charge, in any case. Seymour would never have been such a fool."

Thomas Parry shook his head. "Your Grace, it is known now that Lady Jane's father accepted money from the lord admiral and was promised more, and a high position at court, once the marriage had taken place. It would seem, Your Grace, that the lord admiral did indeed buy Lady Jane from her father."

Elizabeth rose to her feet, striving to keep her face free of all expression. Here was proof enough of Seymour's perfidy. In her eyes he was guilty of the only sort of treason that mattered, treason against herself. She looked from Parry to Mrs. Ashley; their eyes, it seemed, were boring into her. She knew that if she remained in their presence much longer she would betray her true feelings by screaming at them. More than anything else, she felt in need of violent action.

Stretching her arms, she said, "I've sat overlong at my needlework. I'll go riding for an hour or so."

She went out, in spite of Mrs. Ashley's protest, with a single page in attendance, and only then, riding well ahead of the boy, did she give way completely to tears. Presently, with great sobs racking her thin body, she remembered how her stepmother had once remarked that men were a curse. She remembered, too, her own wise-seeming retort, "Say rather, a woman's feelings for a man are a curse," and Catherine's earnest plea, "Then in future, for God's sake watch your feelings." Elizabeth choked back her sobs and dashed the tears from her eyes.

"I'll never cry again," she said out loud, "except perhaps in anger."

In control of herself at last, she wheeled round her horse and galloped back to Cheshunt. As she entered the manor a grim-faced figure stepped forward stiffly to greet her. She recognized him instantly as Sir Robert Tyrwhit, a man who basked in the favor of the lord protector.

"Your Grace," he said, bowing with studied insolence, "I am here to inform you that your establishment is being moved to Hatfield."

The house at Hatfield was a pleasant-enough residence—she had lived there before as a child—but it was deeper in the country and therefore more isolated than Cheshunt.

“By whose orders?” she asked haughtily.

“His Grace the lord protector’s.”

“Then to argue would be foolish,” she said lightly. “Be kind enough, please, to summon Mrs. Ashley.”

Tyrwhit smiled thinly. “Mrs. Ashley has been taken under arrest to London.”

“Send for Parry, then.”

“Parry, I fear, has suffered the same fate.”

Elizabeth recalled Mrs. Ashley’s cry that they were all in danger now, yet strangely she felt a new strength coursing through her veins. She gave Tyrwhit a disdainful look.

“I take it, Sir Robert, that I go to Hatfield under close arrest.”

“Under restraint, at all events.”

She managed a laugh which she hoped would remind Sir Robert of her father’s full-bellied lustiness.

“God’s precious soul,” she rasped, “the lord protector’s position is indeed a perilous one if he goes in fear of a helpless girl like me!”

She laughed again spontaneously at the sight of Sir Robert standing before her speechless, his mouth unbecomingly agape. The silly look of him did much to reinforce her new self-confidence.

Whatever his instructions are, she thought grimly, I’ll match cunning with cunning and beat the devil at his own game, God’s precious soul I will!

Chapter 8

“The whole object of these heavy bouts of questioning,” Sir Robert Tyrwhit remarked unexpectedly, “is to clear Your Grace’s name of scandal. I, on behalf of the lord protector, desire only to help you.”

He spoke with a gentleness that placed Elizabeth more on guard than ever, for during the twelve days she'd been at Hatfield, his manner at the daily examinations had been severe and at times hectoring. Nevertheless, though the examination had left her exhausted, she had stood her ground, kept her counsel and gained a strength of will which, delighting her, had made her feel twice her normal stature.

It came to this, she thought: Seymour's plot to bring about a marriage between the young king and Jane Grey was not in itself a treasonable offense; for the rest, whatever else the lord protector might suspect, he had as yet no proof and was looking to her for absolute evidence which would bring Seymour to the block. True enough, there had been times when, hating Seymour with all her heart, she had been tempted to reveal what little she knew of the proposed rising, but she had soon seen that such a move would place her entirely at the lord protector's mercy, might even cost her her head.

"From the first," Tyrwhit went on, still gently, "I have had a steady conviction that your governess, Mrs. Ashley, and your treasurer, Thomas Parry, were involved in the Seymour intrigue."

Elizabeth sighed elaborately. She was determined that gentleness would serve no better purpose than harshness in yet another repetition of the demand that she speak up and give confirmation of his "steady conviction." However, instead of uttering the demand again, he took a quite different line.

"Ashley and Parry," he said, "have at last seen the error of their ways and confessed everything."

Elizabeth shivered involuntarily. Parry had little to confess, except such gossip as he might have heard, but Mrs. Ashley, of course, knew about Seymour's secret visits to Cheshunt, and the thought that she might be forced, possibly under torture, to speak of them had troubled Elizabeth more than once.

"Naturally," Tyrwhit continued, "since confessions are often false, there may be no truth in the things they have admitted. Your Grace's own story is therefore urgently required, either in confirmation or denial, and more urgently still, as a possible means of clearing your own good name."

Elizabeth almost laughed aloud. Clearly, there had been no

confessions from Ashley and Parry. It was just another of Tyrwhit's ridiculous tricks designed for the purpose of trapping her.

"Since I know nothing of what passed, or might have passed, between them and Seymour," she said, repeating the words she had steadfastly employed at other such examinations, "I can neither say, 'Yes, they were involved,' nor, 'No, they were not involved.' However," she added mildly, "if you'll be good enough to tell me the nature of their confessions I might be able to help you in the matter of clearing, as you so nicely put it, my own good name."

She saw the exasperation, though he masked it quickly, which darkened his face for a moment. And she realized that she herself was in no danger while Ashley held her tongue. "My good name," she added warmly, "is more precious to me than the most costly jewelry."

Tyrwhit nodded in agreement and gave her what she knew he considered an admiring smile. Flattery, she thought; that's his next move!

"During the last twelve days," he said softly, "I have been brought to an unwilling yet a deep respect for Your Grace's spirit and courage. I have even reproached myself at times for the severity of my manner. If I have attempted to browbeat you at all, I have been acting solely under the lord protector's instructions. That, in part, has turned me against him and tempts me now to help you by betraying the trust he places in me."

Watch him, she thought, watch him!

"This letter—" he had taken a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and was offering it to her—"is a confidential one, written by the lord protector and for my eyes only. Take it, Your Grace. Read it carefully."

Elizabeth read the first few lines with seeming casualness, but soon the hot blood was tingling in her cheeks and her eyes were flashing angrily.

"Infamous!" she raged and flung the letter aside.

"And yet," Tyrwhit murmured, "when questioned, Seymour admitted that he knew of no reason why Your Grace should not be with child by him."

Exerting greater control over herself than ever, Elizabeth was able to remain calm and smiling. She saw clearly that it was a prearranged trick, this talk of respect for her spirit and courage, this showing of a letter that had been meant to be shown, a trick intended to infuriate her to such an extent that she would blab whatever she might know of Seymour's intrigue. Then Tyrwhit had added the lie about Seymour's "admission." Seymour for his own sake would never have gone so far, because such an admission would have brought against him yet another charge, that of seduction.

"I'll write this day to the lord protector," she said disdainfully, "and ask his permission to appear at court. Not only to appear there, Master Tyrwhit, but to remain there, and for a full nine months. During that time I'll walk abroad daily so that all shall see me. The lord protector, if he chooses, may hold in readiness a dozen midwives, but their services, I vow, will not be needed."

Tyrwhit turned sharply on his heels and marched from the room, but not before Elizabeth had seen and relished the sickly grin on his face.

"One thing seems certain," she shouted after him, "I'll not be summoned to Whitehall."

She wrote the letter at once and Tyrwhit, leaving later in the day, took it with him to London. He returned to Hatfield after an absence of several days and immediately called Elizabeth to his presence.

"Ah, my request has been granted!" she greeted him.

"A visit to court is not at this stage thought necessary," he said smoothly.

"More questions, then, yet more questions!"

"Indeed no, Your Grace. It merely occurred to me that you might be interested in the following information. Many of Seymour's accomplices have been rounded up and in the hope of saving their own heads have confessed the part they played in the intrigue."

He paused, watching Elizabeth closely. Her heart, of a sudden, was beating rapidly, but she was able to hold his eyes with reasonable steadiness.

"The facts are these," he went on: "Seymour had raised a

private army; he controlled two cannon foundries; he abused his position at the admiralty by setting free a vast number of imprisoned pirates and pressing them into his own service, and he furthered his efforts by causing the issue of counterfeit money, thereby stealing from the government a matter of forty thousand pounds."

Still holding Tyrwhit's eyes, Elizabeth said scathingly: "A bold rogue, but surely a foolish one as well."

Tyrwhit from then on seemed to take delight in giving her details of the progress of events. The members of the council of regency went in a solemn body to the Tower, called Seymour before them, read out the list of charges, and invited him to defend himself. He refused to speak, except at an open trial. Elizabeth could picture him standing there, well aware of his peril yet mocking the council with his ready laugh, and the picture remained stubbornly in her mind, try as she did to harden her heart completely against him.

With an open trial denied him, the bill of attainder was drawn up and read three times in the House of Lords without a single voice raised in his favor. That, Elizabeth knew, was sufficient. The very silence proclaimed him guilty of treason and the penalty was death.

Tormenting her till the end, Tyrwhit brought news of the execution. He was accompanied by a small group of strangers, yet the room seemed crammed with people and quickly she gained the frightening impression of countless eyes staring at her. She looked down for a moment, clearly aware, in spite of the haziness which was clouding her mind, that Tyrwhit and his witnesses were ready to pounce, even at this late stage, if she betrayed herself by the slightest show of emotion.

"Did he die bravely?" she asked tonelessly.

"Bravely enough, Your Grace."

"How many strokes of the ax?"

"Two were sufficient."

The staring eyes had surely multiplied. There was nothing else in the room but eyes, great, boring eyes enlarging all the time. She was being swamped by a waking nightmare more terrifying than any real nightmare she had ever experienced. Struggling for composure, she remembered that there had been

no bad dreams since that night at Chelsea when Seymour had pacified her with his persuasive talk. She seized on this fact and held it fast.

"Seymour had only himself to blame," she said, concentrating on Tyrwhit's face. "He was a man of much wit. He made me laugh on many occasions. But clearly he was also a man of very little judgment."

When Tyrwhit and his men at last withdrew, frustration plainly written on their faces, Elizabeth flung herself into a chair. The strain of it all, mounting through the weeks to this ghastly climax, had left her weak and shaking. She grasped the arms of the chair and tried to think of Seymour in earlier, happier days. Happier days! He had deceived her from the first, planning always how best to use her to his own advantage. Yet she could still hear his merry laugh and her own merry response. A part of him had become a part of her inmost self and would remain there till the day she died.

"But I'm not the same person," she whispered. "Seymour changed me and taught me a sorry lesson. I'll never give another man my love; I'll never trust another man again. I'll use them all in the future, twist them this way and that, to my own advantage." She rose slowly from the chair, dry-eyed and tense. "And this I swear: if ever I take a husband, his name will be England."

II. Dudley

Chapter 9

It seemed a great deal longer than five months since Seymour had gone to the block. From the first she had returned to her studies with a vengeance, for there was escape that way and the steady consolidation of the only power she could achieve at present, that of scholarly knowledge. She had been ill for a while, and Mrs. Ashley had been returned to her. Thomas Parry had also been permitted to take up his old place at her side, but both he and Mrs. Ashley were answerable now to a higher authority at Hatfield, Tyrwhit's wife, a not unkindly woman, but one clearly in awe of her husband.

Tyrwhit himself was often at Hatfield as well, his presence a constant reminder that Elizabeth, if not exactly a prisoner, was still in disgrace. It was an intolerable situation from which she could see no escape. She played a waiting game, she told herself, but for what was she waiting? Her half brother's death? And after that her half sister Mary's?

Today she was trying to forget all this in the pleasure of young Lord Robert Dudley's company. Robin, as she called him, had appeared unexpectedly at Hatfield House this morning, and for an hour they had chatted gaily about the days long past when they had romped together as children. They were strolling now in the park, Elizabeth marvelling at the fact that she had been able, for the first time since Seymour's death, to laugh spontaneously. Without paying too much attention to what he was saying, she gave Robin a grateful glance. He was tall and slim, with hair as red as her own, which had always

seemed a sort of bond between them. Both had been born on the same day, an even greater bond, Elizabeth being the elder by exactly one hour. She often teased him about this, claiming with mock severity that because of the vast difference in their ages, she possessed a wisdom far superior to his own.

"Well," she demanded, "what is it that you're not and you want to know if I am?"

Robin laughed merrily. "If you aren't the absent-minded one! We were talking about our joint birthday, which falls next week. Our sixteenth, mind you, and therefore most important. I remembered you were born in the Chamber of Virgins at Greenwich Palace. I said it was a doubtful distinction. Who wants to be a virgin? So I said I wasn't and asked if you still were."

Elizabeth looked at him coldly; all the pleasure she had felt since his arrival fell swiftly from her. She studied his face keenly. He was smiling roguishly and his eyes held the most innocent of expressions. Yet doubt was tormenting her and inevitably she asked herself if Robin, because of their childhood friendship, had been sent to Hatfield to win her confidence.

"How horrified you look!" he cried. "Have I offended you?"

"Deeply," she said, but found his grin so infectious that it was impossible not to laugh.

"Well, *are* you, Bess?"

She cuffed him lightly on the arm. To regard Robin as a spy was, after all, unreasonable. Of course it was! Robin's father, the Earl of Warwick, was a relentless enemy of Lord Protector Somerset. It was even rumored that Warwick and Somerset were engaged in a battle of wits, a battle which could only end, for one or the other, on the scaffold. The lord protector was in any case going too far, especially in religious matters. There had been a Catholic rising in Cornwall, and as a result twenty-nine priests had been hanged and quartered.

"Before I forget," Robin was saying, "the king sent you his brotherly regards."

"Thank you," she said formally. "Do you see much of Edward these days?"

"Indeed I do. I'm a gentleman of the bedchamber now."

"Your father's influence is increasing, then."

"We Dudleys like to think so, Bess. Just as we like to think that Somerset's days are numbered."

"Seymour thought as much and *he* went to the block."

Too late she wanted to bite back her words. To speak openly of Seymour, however briefly and innocently, might still be dangerous.

"Pooh!" Robin cried, "my father's too wily a bird to fall foul of Somerset. If anybody goes to the block it won't be Father. Just look at the mess this precious lord protector is making of England. The country all but bankrupt, foreign relations strained in every direction. Sending people to the Tower or even hanging them won't help him much. Lord protector indeed! Soon he won't have the power to protect anybody, least of all himself!—" He broke off with an appealing laugh. "Not that I care much for state affairs, so let's talk of something else. The late Thomas Seymour, for instance."

"Why Seymour in particular?" Elizabeth asked, as casually as she could.

"Because of the gossip about you and him, and gossip is always amusing."

"Not to the people victimized!"

"Seymour may have been victimized, but not you, Bess. Not much, at any rate."

"I suffered more than he did!" Elizabeth said hotly.

"With admirable fortitude, then! I have it for certain—my father's on the council, remember—that you got the better of Master Tyrwhit at every turn. Many people admired you for your courage, my father among them, and of course me, too." Robin's appealing laugh came again. "Did that old lecher Seymour really try to make love to you?"

"So you're back at that again!"

"Back at what, Bess?"

"It's the same question put differently!"

Robin chuckled richly. "I hadn't meant it to be, but I suppose it is. Seymour certainly had a way with women, and you being so inexperienced—"

Elizabeth seized him by the shoulders and shook him violently. Laughing, Robin gripped her by the waist. She kicked

out at his legs and soon they were rolling in the grass together. He got the better of her presently and held her flat on her back, his fingers biting into her forearms, his knees digging into the ground on either side of her slim waist. Recovering his breath first, he bent his head swiftly and kissed her full on the lips.

"That's the first time I've kissed you since we were children, Bess. I wondered what it would be like, now that we're grown up."

"Well, what was it like?"

"Awful! Nice firm lips, warm too, but you didn't kiss me back."

Conscious of the pressure of his thighs, Elizabeth squirmed suddenly, freed herself and sprang to her feet.

"How disappointing for you," she sneered, "a man of your vast experience!"

"Disappointing, yes!"

Robin rolled over on his back and grinned up at her. He was a handsome youth, Elizabeth acknowledged readily, much handsomer than Seymour, for all his good looks, could ever have been.

"Robin," she said seriously, "I was lonely when you came today. I've been lonely and friendless far longer than I care to remember. Your visit made me so happy at first. Then you started asking questions, the sort of questions Tyrwhit used to ask, though you framed yours differently. That made me unhappy and lonely again. I thought an old friend had returned from the past, but are you really a friend, or just another enemy in disguise?"

Robin jumped to his feet, then went down on one knee before her. He took her hand solemnly in his and kissed it. "Forgive me, Bess. I was silly and thoughtless. I love you dearly and would never hurt you willingly. I came here today because I wondered how you were. I guessed, you see, how much you must have suffered. I came to tell you that I'm your friend for life, and always, if you wish it, your most humble and obedient servant."

Elizabeth looked at him searchingly. He sounded sincere, yet still she found it impossible to trust him. Tyrwhit had sought to trap her with flattery; perhaps Robin, young as he

was, was playing the same game. His ambitious father, Warwick, might be planning to use her in his opposition to Somerset, to use her in a way dangerous to herself.

"You don't believe me," Robin said sadly.

She ruffled his hair. "It isn't that I don't *want* to believe you."

He rose to his feet and bowed sweepingly.

"My words will stand the test of time, Your Grace. Just wait and see! I'll prove myself sincere, and soon, even if it means betraying my own father."

Chapter 10

"Even if it means betraying my own father . . ."

Elizabeth had often recalled Robin's words, and now, as he stood before her again, she wondered hopefully if the youthful vow had brought him on this second visit to Hatfield House.

"I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever see you again," she said sternly. "My birthday came and went, but not a word from you, not even a small present. Are the Dudley's growing tightfisted?"

"No more tightfisted than the Tudors," Robin retorted. "What did you send *me* for my birthday? Not even your best wishes!"

"Had I as much as written," she pointed out, "Master Tyrwhit would have intercepted my letter and sent it to the lord protector, and that might have made things awkward for the Dudleys."

"The lord protector . . ." Robin dwelt smilingly over the words. "Which protector, Bess? My father, Warwick, or that wretch Somerset?"

"Robin," she gasped, "you have news, splendid news!"

"Somerset has fallen," Robin said softly. "The council, led by my father, rose against him. We have him lodged snugly in the Tower. There's a new protector now, Bess, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick. Of course he won't use the title 'lord protector.' It has an odious sound in England."

"It has indeed," Elizabeth agreed.

She was looking at him carefully. He spoke with a quiet authority; apparently he firmly believed his sixteenth birthday had turned him into a man overnight. His dress, though not too exaggerated, was certainly showy and fashionable.

"The king sends you his warmest greetings," he went on. "His majesty wants you to know that you won't be a prisoner at Hatfield much longer. He intends to summon you to court as soon as possible." Laughter bubbled up in his voice for a moment. "I do trust that the Lady Elizabeth is suitably grateful to the Dudleys,"

"In this world I've learned to be grateful only to myself," Elizabeth told him sharply. "However, I willingly admit that, because of the Dudleys, a satisfactory state of affairs has been brought about. Satisfactory, that is, providing your father is not seduced by the power he thinks he now possesses."

"I'd like to see his face," Robin laughed, "if you stood before him, charging him with such a warning in such a voice."

"My voice is but the voice of a weak and helpless girl," Elizabeth said.

"A weak and helpless girl! You look like neither, Bess; you sound like neither. You're your father all over again, your chin pushed up as his used to be, your eyes flashing haughtily. Weak and helpless! I don't believe it; *you* don't believe it."

"God's precious soul I don't!" she burst out.

Robin fell to one knee and took her hand in his.

"I have a request to make of the Lady Elizabeth," he said, his voice grave but his eyes alight with mischief.

"Make it, then!"

"Your Grace, I humbly ask your permission to take unto myself a wife."

Elizabeth's hand stiffened in his light, warm grip. So this was Warwick's next move, an attempt to bind her to him through marriage with his son!

"Why ask my permission?" she said. "I'm a person of no importance in the land. Ask permission of my brother the king."

"Oh, Father will naturally do that when the arrangements are completed between himself and Sir John Robsart."

"Sir John Robsart?" Elizabeth echoed.

"A wealthy fellow with a marriageable daughter named Amy."

Elizabeth withdrew her hand quickly. She had come close to making a fool of herself; indeed in her own eyes she had done so, and that was inexcusable.

"Dear Bess," Robin said, "are you cross?"

"Cross? In heaven's name why should I be cross?"

"I'm sure you don't approve of Amy Robsart."

"You may marry any girl who takes your fancy, as far as I'm concerned."

"Amy has taken my father's fancy, not mine. At least, her father's money has. I take it, then, that you grant me your august permission?"

It was impossible not to laugh, Robin's face being of a sudden so woebegone.

"Idiot," she said, "you haven't told me yet why you want my permission."

"There are two reasons, Bess. In the first place you're older than me by a whole hour and always liked to order me about. In the second, I know for a certainty that you'll be far more important some day than you might think."

Than she might think! That wasn't possible.

"Why for a certainty?" she asked.

"I dabble in astrology. It's written in the stars. They show you with a crown on your head, a scepter in your hand, and the stern frown of responsibility on your face."

"If that ever happens it won't be for years, my sweet Robin. You'll be married then, and no permission of mine needed."

"Ah, but you Tudors were always an imperious lot. I want your permission now, then if you disapprove of my wife later I'll be able to say, 'But your majesty, you gave your permission.' That will spike your guns, Bess."

"It won't, my poor Robin, for I won't give you my permission, now or ever."

"What a contrary lot you Tudors are," he laughed, springing to his feet. "I'll be taking Amy Robsart, it seems, in defiance of your wishes."

"Enough of this stupid game," she told him severely.

"I still think you're cross about it all."

"Oh, rubbish!"

He cocked his head on one side. "Do you want me for yourself?"

"Why should I? I'll never marry, never!"

"Wanting and marrying are quite different."

Elizabeth felt the hot blood rising in her cheeks and, angry with herself, she turned on her heels.

"If ever I have a need that way," she flung over her shoulder, "I'll choose a man, not a callow youth."

A man like Seymour, she thought, as she strode rapidly from the room. And there it was, the ghost of Seymour plaguing her again when she had thought it laid forever. How was it, she asked herself angrily, that memory of so unworthy a man could still monopolize her mind to the exclusion of all else?

Elizabeth was in the courtyard now, only to find that Robin had followed her and was walking at her side, matching his step with her own long swinging stride.

"I'll not always be a callow youth," he murmured.

She glanced at him swiftly. The beauty of his face in profile smote her heart. She had a deep affection for him, even though still unable fully to trust him. Perhaps if she were to take him that way, the ghost of Seymour would be laid with a vengeance. It was an enticing thought; exciting too, so exciting that she caught her breath sharply. She looked away quickly. There was a queer stabbing pain in her breast; it seemed to be composed equally of desire and fear.

"I can wait," Robin remarked impishly.

Elizabeth looked at him again, as steadily as she could. With the pain passing now, the world about her was regaining its momentarily lost reality.

"I, too, can wait," she said calmly.

Chapter II

"The poor king is desperately ill," Mrs. Ashley announced.

"A rumor, no more," Elizabeth said patiently.

There had been many rumors, many false alarms, since her state visit to court over two years ago, the visit which had been unaccountably delayed from the October day when Robin had

told her of Somerset's fall to the middle of the following March. She was nineteen now, which, pleasing as it was, seemed incredible. She would, in fact, be twenty the month after next.

Robin's visits, which she had expected to continue, had ceased abruptly. He had married his Amy Robsart; that was a fact, not a rumor. His father, adding Duke of Northumberland to his other titles, now exercised full power in the land; that, too, was a fact, not a rumor. As for Somerset, he had been permitted for a time to sit at the council table but in the end had been sent to the block. Elizabeth could only assume that Northumberland, for all his supposed friendliness toward her, had forbidden Robin to visit Hatfield House again. So much then for Robin's assertion that he'd prove himself sincere.

"Would to God it were a rumor," Mrs. Ashley was saying, "but the news reached me through a most reliable source. The father of one of the kitchen maids is a gardener at Greenwich Palace. The king has been taken there, a secret move, they say, on the part of Northumberland. He was seen on arrival, the king, I mean. He was so weak he could scarcely walk. And since then, there's been no sight nor sound of him, except once, when his face, pale as death, appeared for a moment at a window."

"If Edward were ill he would have summoned me to Greenwich," Elizabeth decided.

"One would think so, Your Grace, yet it seems that a dark air of secrecy surrounds this illness."

Elizabeth began to feel real alarm. Perhaps secrecy *had* been practiced. For if Edward were desperately ill, Northumberland would be desperately alarmed. Mary, next in line of succession, would certainly have no truck with this Protestant dictator, once she was firmly seated on the throne. Firmly? Northumberland would do all in his power to prevent Mary from even ascending the throne. What was he planning? There was only one thing to do if she meant to get at the truth.

"I'll go to Greenwich to see the king," she decided.

"That might be dangerous," Mrs. Ashley faltered.

"I go merely as a sister anxious about a brother's health," Elizabeth said. "I see no danger in that."

She started out with a small train of attendants. Thomas

Parry and Mrs. Ashley rode on either side of her. A dozen of her ladies followed behind. In the van and at the rear were soldiers of her personal guard, soldiers answerable nonetheless to the Duke of Northumberland. It was a warm July day; the countryside shimmered magically under a light summer haze.

From time to time she called a brief halt in the small, peaceful-seeming villages and gladly permitted the country people to cluster about her. It surprised her that she, seen so rarely in public, should be so quickly recognized. She chatted with these people, allowing the older, more serious ones to kiss her hand, joking gaily with the girls and their farmhand sweethearts. At one such halt an old crone burst into tears and croaked: "Her father's daughter for sure; King Harry all over again, God bless her heart." This made her feel humble and brought a great lump to her throat. Isolated at Hatfield, she was hedged in by hate and suspicion, but here in a tiny village the unquestioning love of simple people reached out, like a soft wind from heaven, and touched her gently.

"This is the real England," she told Mrs. Ashley emotionally. "These are the people who matter."

At a village ten miles from Hatfield the people who had gathered about her were roughly scattered by the arrival of a hard-riding cavalry force. The officer in command gave her an insolent look.

"Your Grace must return to Hatfield," he said peremptorily.

"Whose orders are these?" she asked haughtily.

"It scarcely matters, Your Grace."

"I demand to know!" she insisted.

"The king's orders, then."

"Surely you mean Northumberland's!"

"It scarcely matters," he repeated.

"What if I refuse to return to Hatfield?"

"If Your Grace refuses I shall be compelled to escort you there. And I warn you, if you try to leave again by some other route, you'll find all roads between Hatfield and Greenwich blocked against you."

Elizabeth went angrily back to Hatfield. Edward was dead, she was sure of it, but there was no time now for tears. Edward was dead and Northumberland was plotting foully on his own

account. She had scarcely changed from her riding clothes before a clatter of hooves in the courtyard drew her hurriedly to the window. She flung open the casement. Another and stronger cavalry force was below. She stared hard at the commanding officer before recognition came to her. It was Robin, a grown man now, proud and reckless of bearing, the neat pointed beard and the drooping mustache making him look even older than he was. A brave sight, she thought, with the sun glinting on his polished armor.

"A word in private with the Lady Elizabeth!" he cried, sweeping off his plumed cap.

He was admitted at once to her presence, and for a moment she felt stupidly at a loss for words. He was taller than she had thought when looking down on him from the window.

"So we meet again at last," she managed to say.

"Yes, Bess! And may I flatter myself that you've missed me as much as I've missed you?"

"How gallantly you speak in the absence of your wife!" she said, and felt capable now of dealing with him adequately, whatever the reason for his visit. "Are you here to place me under arrest?"

"No," he laughed. "Indeed, my presence here is contrary to my father's orders."

"Where should you be, Robin, if not at Hatfield?"

"Wherever the Lady Mary is, and no one seems sure of that. I'm ordered to find her, arrest her and convey her to the Tower."

"Mary, but not me."

Robin's eyes twinkled. "The Lady Mary is an implacable Catholic and as such, dangerous to my father. You, a Protestant, are less dangerous. His plan for you is therefore much more subtle."

Elizabeth thrust up her chin. "I'm next in succession to Mary. Whatever my religious views, only a chastened Northumberland would be permitted a place in any government of mine."

"Next in succession to Mary . . ." Robin brooded.

"Robin," she pleaded, scarcely listening to him now, "I hear rumors on every hand. I want the truth. Is Edward dead?"

Robin bowed his head.

"Dear Bess," he said gently, "I know you loved him. Yes, the king is dead."

Elizabeth clenched her hands. She had vowed that only one thing, anger, would ever make her weep again. But the struggle was an exhausting one. Victory left her weak and trembling.

"The king's death is a state secret," Robin went on. "For the present the people must believe him still alive. Even when there was scarcely breath left in his body, he was held for a moment at a window. Later the corpse was displayed in the same way." His voice rose indignantly. "It was a monstrous thing, Bess."

"Monstrous, yes," she agreed, but there was no time now for horror. "Are you prepared to betray your father still further and tell me his plans in full?"

"Judge for yourself, Bess! My father forced his will upon the dying king. He placed Jane Grey next in succession to Edward, and Edward accepted the change."

"Why Jane and not me?"

Robin laughed dryly. "My father arranged a marriage between my elder brother Guilford and Lady Jane Grey."

"A cunning move," Elizabeth commented, "but a move likely to lead him one step closer to the block."

"Oh, he knows the risk, hence all this secrecy until the Lady Mary is safely held in the Tower."

"Leaving me still at liberty?"

"*Liberty*, Bess?"

"I am, I admit, a prisoner at Hatfield."

"A rising in your favor could free you. Father wants you in the Tower as well as Mary, but he daren't risk angering his own Protestant supporters by taking you there under guard. He'll secure you if he can without apparent force. I came to warn you about it. Later today you'll receive a message. You'll be told that Edward is dying, begging you to go in haste to Greenwich—"

"But I was stopped from going, turned back to Hatfield!"

"Those were earlier orders, issued before Edward died. Edward had to die before you could be tempted to Greenwich. Go to Greenwich now and that's the last people will see of you. There'll be reports about a serious illness, caused by Edward's

death. You'll recover from it only if you agree to the change in the order of succession."

"What am I to do, Robin?" she asked simply.

"Plead illness when my father's false message reaches you. Say you're too ill to sit a horse or even lie in a litter. You'll be safe for a time. Father won't drag you from Hatfield by force. I've just told you why." Robin smiled guilelessly. "Well, have I proved myself sincere?"

For answer Elizabeth threw her arms impulsively round his neck and kissed him on the lips.

"God's precious soul," she cried, "it was you this time who didn't kiss back!"

Chapter 12

A deputation arrived at Hatfield during the late afternoon. It was exactly as Robin had said, and Elizabeth, having taken the precaution of retiring to her bed, refused to receive Northumberland's men. Sending Mrs. Ashley out with her reply, she said she was broken-hearted but too racked with pain to make the journey to Greenwich. There was much hesitation, Mrs. Ashley reported, but in the end the deputation went quietly from Hatfield.

"Safe for a time," Elizabeth said.

"But for how long?" Mrs. Ashley wailed. "The house is heavily guarded. There are soldiers everywhere."

A few days later, when not even a single rumor had reached Hatfield, Elizabeth received official word from Northumberland that Edward was dead and that Jane Grey, duly proclaimed in London, was now Queen. She began to fear then that Northumberland's grip on England was a firm one. She wondered what had happened to Mary. Had Robin succeeded in finding her? Was she now in the Tower? Her fear, however, was minimized when Northumberland sent another deputation to wait upon her.

"Your Grace is invited to acknowledge Queen Jane as the

rightful sovereign of England," the leader of the group told her.

Elizabeth's chin shot up. "*Invited?*"

"Your Grace is further invited to cede your rights to the succession."

"I thought my rights had been set aside, along with those of the Lady Mary."

"Voluntary cession," he went on, ignoring this, "would carry with it a considerable reward. Complete freedom would be yours, land grants would be awarded and an income more than sufficient for your needs."

"Bribery!" Elizabeth laughed. "The great and terrible Northumberland, who appears to have put the cart before the horse, would buy my acquiescence! Amazing! Touching, even!"

The man all but lost his temper. "Your Grace may give the matter a day's consideration," he said briefly.

Quickly she asked, "Has the Lady Mary been approached in the same way?"

He avoided her eyes. "A day's consideration," he repeated.

It seemed certain, then, that Mary was still at liberty.

"I require not even a moment's consideration," she said haughtily. "Tell Northumberland that during my sister's life I have no right to discuss such a proposition. Address yourself to her, and remember that I owe allegiance to one monarch only, Queen Mary of England."

But after the deputation had withdrawn, she began to wonder if she had gone too far, and waited daily for Northumberland to drag her to London by force. Presently a few rumors penetrated the watch that was still kept on Hatfield House, the most persistent being that the eastern counties had risen in support of Mary, and when Robin Dudley appeared suddenly one morning, Elizabeth learned that this was no rumor but actual fact.

"However," he said, "my father intends to put down the rising. He's marching against the rebels now at the head of ten thousand men."

"What of Mary?"

"Obviously I failed to find her. She was in hiding, but still managed to send a message to my father. She demanded his

allegiance and ordered him to proclaim her queen in London and elsewhere."

"Did you come here, Robin, merely to tell me this, or are you under orders to arrest me?"

"If I were under orders to arrest you I wouldn't be here," he said stanchly. "I came with some good advice. I want you to join your sister in her march on London."

"Her march on London?" Elizabeth gasped.

"The news of it reached me just as I was about to join my father. His absence from London has apparently induced her to make a bold move. She has, I understand, a large force at her disposal. It won't be a matter of taking the city, merely of occupying it. In any case, there were loud mutterings against my father when he marched out of London. If he fails to put down the rising—"

"If? You expect failure, Robin?"

"I think it possible. That's why I want you to secure yourself with your sister. If you leave Hatfield at once I think you might meet up with her at Wanstead. Go to her, Bess. More than likely she suspects you of plotting with my father. Disarm her by swearing allegiance to her."

"Good advice," Elizabeth agreed. "Do you propose to accompany me and do the same?"

Robin shook his head. "I betrayed my father in order to help you, but while he lives I can betray him in no other way, for no other purpose."

"God bless and keep you!" Elizabeth cried emotionally.

"If He will only keep me," Robin laughed, "and make it possible for me to serve you again some day."

Elizabeth embraced him swiftly. Robin was her friend, her only friend. He had given ample proof of it. She was ready, she who had vowed never to trust a man again, to place her life in his hands.

"You're trembling, Bess."

"I'm afraid, Robin."

"Afraid—you?"

She stood away from him and laughed shakily. "I think highly of you, for I rarely admit fear, even to myself."

"Remember what I saw in the stars," he said. "Your path to

the throne may be a perilous one, but you'll tread it unscathed, I warrant!"

When Robin had gone preparations began immediately for the journey to London. Mrs. Ashley said excitedly that they must make a fine showing, but Elizabeth shook her head decisively. Her first concern was to cause a favorable impression when riding into London at her sister's side. Mary, as she knew of old, would be elaborately arrayed and weighed down with costly jewels. Therefore she herself must wear a plain black gown and very little jewelry. I must also shrink modestly, she told herself, look down shyly, and if I smile at all, I must smile like an innocent virgin. This made her chuckle, and all the nameless forebodings that had filled her with fear vanished quickly.

With her followers she left Hatfield unmolested. Nor did she encounter any opposition as the journey continued. On every hand she heard two distinct cries: "God bless Queen Mary," and "Death for Northumberland." This excess of loyalty to Mary, coming as it did from Protestant and Catholic alike, amazed her. She concluded that it really was loyalty to her father's wishes rather than to Mary herself, loyalty that spelled doom for Northumberland. Fear touched her again, for if Northumberland fell, what of Robin? Perhaps it was also written in the stars that she must stand alone, always alone. There was inspiration in the thought, but inspiration bereft of any real comfort.

She met her half sister, as Robin had expected, at Wanstead. Mary, despite the look of triumph on her face, had aged surprisingly since Elizabeth had last seen her during the state visit to Edward's court. Her eyebrows, always thin, had completely disappeared, giving her face, with its rounded brow, an egglike appearance. The scarlet of her velvet riding costume emphasized the sallowness of her complexion. A band of diamonds and rubies held in place the silver caul which covered her head, and round her wrists and on her fingers more diamonds and other precious stones sparkled in the sunlight. She was thirty-seven, yet to Elizabeth she had the look of a woman twenty years older.

"I was informed that you were too ill to leave Hatfield," Mary remarked, when formal greetings had been exchanged.

"I would have gladly risen from my deathbed," Elizabeth said, with a convincing humility, "to greet Your Majesty and join you in your triumphant advance on London."

Mary laughed dryly. "A pretty speech. You may kiss my hand."

Elizabeth did so, humble-seeming still, but with all the pride of the Tudors crying out against this act of subservience. In the eyes of Mary, daughter of the first wife, she was, she knew, a lowly commoner, the bastard offspring of a philandering father.

"Far better that you should join me now," Mary went on contemptuously, "than later, when the throne is mine unchallenged. You have in you much of your mother's cunning, meek as your bearing seems to be this day."

Elizabeth choked back her rising anger.

"Do we go straight to Whitehall?" she asked.

Mary shook her head. "We go to the Tower."

"The *Tower*?"

"By tradition a monarch awaiting coronation goes first to the Tower. Where else, then, can I go? And neither of us, as yet," she added grimly, "need enter by Traitor's Gate."

"Hardly," Elizabeth said quietly, her chin thrust up, "since neither of us is a traitor."

Mary looked at her searchingly. "To God all things are known, and God, in His good time, will make them known to me also."

The fanatical ring in her voice shocked Elizabeth deeply. "God save and guide Your Majesty," she said, bowing her head.

Mary laughed gratingly. "God chose me the moment I was born. He guided me from then till now, and will surely guide me till the end."

Chapter 13

"On the one hand the son of the King of Denmark," Mary said briskly, "on the other, the Prince of Piedmont. You may take your pick, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth masked her rising irritation with an elaborate sigh.

"I should have thought that the question of marriage was more important to you than to me," she said carefully.

A dreamy look came to Mary's eyes. "It is indeed, if I am to give the country an heir. Negotiations are going forward now, as you know, but we must get you married as well."

Elizabeth and Mary were alone in the royal apartments at the Palace of Whitehall. They had come to Whitehall after Mary had made the gesture of first going to the Tower, and Elizabeth, who was to remain for the time being at court, had apartments of her own in the palace.

Robin Dudley's fears had been justified, for his father had failed to put down the rising. Indeed, there had been no real engagement at all, and Northumberland, either losing his nerve or his reason, had thrown up his cap and called upon his men to acknowledge Mary as the rightful queen. Further, in an effort to save himself, he had espoused the Catholic faith, but even though Mary had praised him loudly and publicly for his piety, she still sent him to the block. In other respects, however, she had shown a remarkably clemency; only two of Northumberland's supporters had followed him to the block, while Robin, as well as "Queen" Jane and her husband, had merely been thrown into the Tower, there to await Her Majesty's pleasure. Clearly, this Catholic queen, who intended to restore the old faith, was feeling her way most carefully.

"The Prince of Piedmont is perhaps the better choice," Mary went on. "You must make up your mind, and quickly. My duty as I see it is to get you married before marrying myself."

Duty, Elizabeth thought cynically. In point of fact Mary wanted her married to a foreign prince and removed from England. She also wanted the marriage and the removal to take place before her own marriage, for she planned to marry Prince Philip of Spain, son of Charles V, Emperor of Germany and King of Spain. And such a Catholic alliance might cause Protestant risings, especially if Elizabeth remained in England.

"Well, which prince do you favor?" Mary demanded.

Elizabeth looked at her half sister as calmly as she could. It was incredible to think that Philip of Spain, or any other prince, for that matter, would want to take Mary for his wife.

There was nothing feminine about her, neither in figure nor manner nor voice. She was harshness, all harshness. But perhaps, Elizabeth tried to reason with herself, the unhappiness of Mary's life was the cause, that and the weakness of her body, the constant ailments she suffered. It was surprising she had lived so long. Surely she could survive only a few years more.

If I can stand firm and unafraid, Elizabeth told herself, the throne will be mine without any effort of my own. And she resolved, as she had done many times before, never to become involved in any plot, however promising it might seem.

"Cease this daydreaming and answer my question," Mary said sharply.

Elizabeth heaved a deep sigh. "It would go much against the grain to marry a foreigner."

"Are you criticizing my own marriage plans?" Mary demanded.

"Goodness, no. I'm thinking only of myself. If I must marry, why not an Englishman?"

"What a pity Robert Dudley already possesses a wife," Mary sneered.

"I had no particular Englishman in view," Elizabeth said quietly.

"I have still to make up my mind about you and Robert Dudley," Mary went on thoughtfully. "For one thing, you were childhood friends—"

"And friends only we remain!"

"I'm not speaking of love, but the hatching of plots. Dudley visited you at Hatfield. That much is known to me. If I knew more, if for instance I had proof of your implication in his father's villainy, I'd not be planning a marriage for you now."

"Oh come, Mary," Elizabeth said heatedly, "would I, your heir, have wanted to see Jane Grey on the throne?"

"My heir . . ." Mary pondered.

"I'm still that, surely!"

"No change has been made," Mary said stiffly. "My father's will still stands. Nature, however, will rule you out in God's good time. Prince Philip will give me many healthy children, and they in their own turn will have healthy children too. But enough! I command your obedience. You refuse to choose for

yourself. Therefore I choose for you the Prince of Piedmont."

"I doubt if any foreign prince would find me acceptable," Elizabeth parried, "since by English law I'm my father's illegitimate child."

"As I am, as I am!" Mary cried bitterly. "That father of ours! Three children he had, each by a different wife, and as he went on setting aside one wife, taking another, he declared us all illegitimate. Well, the law can be changed! My father had only one true wife, only one legitimate child. A new act of Parliament shall be passed, his marriage with my mother declared valid, my own legitimacy re-established. And by heaven, Elizabeth, his marriage with your mother shall at the same time be declared null and void. A bastard you were born and a bastard you'll remain!"

Much to her surprise, Elizabeth felt not anger but a flood of defiant pride. She remembered her father in the way she liked always to think of him, a jolly companion, a fearless statesman, a king who *was* a king. The King's Majesty, whose will was law. She was that man's daughter and nothing else mattered. I vow here now, she told herself fiercely, that when I mount the throne there'll be no act of Parliament to make me other than just that, my father's daughter.

"Elizabeth, forgive me," Mary begged suddenly. "I went too far. I never intended to hurt you. I was beside myself. The many injustices of the past overwhelmed me. Please forgive me."

Mary, clumsy in her penitence, her lips quivering, her hands shaking violently, was a more repulsive sight to Elizabeth than Mary at her most fanatical.

"The law is the law, Your Majesty," she said. "What, then, is there to forgive?"

"As you will," Mary muttered sullenly. "My sole concern, whether or not you believe it, is to see you happy, and true happiness will never be yours until you set aside your heretical upbringing."

Elizabeth began to feel desperate, for this subject had been broached many times during the past month. Mary, she was willing to admit, was utterly sincere in religious matters, but by bringing about a conversion she also sought to deprive the Protestants of all hope of a future Protestant queen.

"Hear Mass with me tomorrow," Mary begged.

Elizabeth shook her head. "My father's wishes are still law to me. I'd rather die than betray him."

Mary's temper flared up instantly.

"And well you may," she raged.

Chapter 14

"These are terrible times," Mrs. Ashley moaned. "Sleep for me is a thing of the past. No sooner does my head touch the pillow than the shadow of the block looms over me. Your Grace was never in graver danger, never!"

"My danger is acute," Elizabeth admitted, "but wailing like this will help nobody."

In residence once more at Hatfield House, she was discussing the new rising which had taken place against her sister Mary. The leader was Sir Thomas Wyatt, a staunch supporter of Robin Dudley's late father. Wyatt's aim was to prevent Queen Mary from marrying the Spanish prince, and because of his earlier association with Northumberland it was assumed that he intended to free the captive Jane Grey and place her on the throne. It was further rumored that he might also have Elizabeth herself in mind, since Elizabeth was regarded by many as the new rallying point of Protestantism.

It was now January in the year 1554, and last December, five months after she had entered London at her sister's side, Elizabeth had gained permission to retire from court. She had asked permission many times, saying that in the seclusion of Hatfield she would be able to reach a decision on the two vital questions of marriage and a change of religion.

"Say rather," Mary had retorted, "that at Hatfield you will have more freedom in which to plan my overthrow!" Then suddenly she had changed her mind and cried, "Go to Hatfield, hatch the plot so dear to your heart, risk certain discovery and prepare yourself for a charge of treason."

And so, though free of Mary's persistent nagging, Elizabeth

had found little pleasure in being at Hatfield again, for she knew she was being watched and spied upon.

"This may be a terrible thing to say," Mrs. Ashley cried, "but circumstances force me to pray for Sir Thomas Wyatt's success. Only through that can I see safety for Your Grace."

It seemed at first that Wyatt might well succeed, and when conflicting reports reached Hatfield, Mary invited Elizabeth to return to London where, she asserted, she would be cordially received. Elizabeth had no faith in Mary's apparent friendliness. She suspected her of using guile, as Northumberland before her had tried to do—guile, when force, because of the Wyatt rebellion, might add fuel to Wyatt's cause. Accordingly she replied that she was ill and unable at present to undertake the journey.

Mary made no further move for two weeks. Then she sent Lord Howard, several other of her gentlemen, and her personal physician to Hatfield. Elizabeth, warned in time of their approach, retired hurriedly to her bed. At first she refused to see either Howard or the physician, but in the end she was forced to receive them. The physician, merely by glancing at her, declared her fit to travel in the litter which had been brought for that purpose, and Lord Howard broke the news of Wyatt's failure.

"Wyatt is in the Tower," he said. "A gallant gentleman, Your Grace, but for all that, we feel confident that the rack, with which he is already familiar, will induce him to talk."

"Is talk necessary?" Elizabeth asked coldly. "His rebellion, I presume, is enough in itself to condemn him."

Lord Howard smiled genially. "Wyatt had many accomplices. We want their names. Our intention is to bring them all to trial, even if one of them is a young woman of high birth who has a habit of pleading illness in certain embarrassing circumstances."

Elizabeth felt a compulsion then to rise from her bed, shun the litter and ride fearlessly to London, as her father would have done, but she judged it necessary to continue the play-acting a little longer and to cause as much delay as possible.

"I'll dress," she said, "and start at once."

She chose a gown of pure white and decided against wearing even the smallest piece of jewelry. Once dressed, she glanced critically at herself in the mirror. She was very pale. The strain of the last few months, wearing down her nerves, had robbed her of her naturally healthy color. Well, that was all to the good, and to those who saw her during the journey, her flame-like hair would emphasize the pitiful fragility of her condition. She smiled faintly. The journey would take as long as she could possibly contrive.

Ready at last, she declared herself incapable of walking and was carried out to the litter. Rugs and furs were wrapped about her, for the winter's day was bitterly cold, and the heavy curtains of the litter were drawn to shield her from the biting wind. For a time she lay patiently in the litter, but presently she flung open the curtains and called Howard to her side.

"How far have we traveled?" she asked.

"Four miles, Your Grace."

She glanced beyond Howard. She was escorted, she saw, by a strong armed guard, and the country folk who had gathered in little groups by the roadside were crying out against the harshness of it. "God save the Lady Elizabeth," she heard a man implore and noticed that his fists were clenched in anger. A few days with scenes like this taking place would surely gain her much sympathy.

"I can travel no farther," she told Howard. "The swaying of the litter fills me with nausea."

Howard hesitated and engaged in a hasty consultation with the physician, who murmured that the queen had insisted on the Lady Elizabeth being shown every consideration. Howard then agreed that the night should be spent at a nearby country house.

Every consideration, Elizabeth thought. Was there hope in that? She doubted it. Mary was merely guarding against provoking further trouble by too harsh an attitude.

The next day she traveled another four miles, and so, by continuing the delaying tactics, she succeeded in prolonging the journey for a full five days. Nor did she miss the slightest opportunity of gaining sympathy en route. In London, however,

it seemed to her that such sympathy as there was came from a people already cowed. With the curtains well drawn back, she looked out sadly on the groups of watchers, silent, most of them, except for an occasional cry of "God save the Lady Elizabeth." She could only pray that the Londoners would remember this day, and think of her as a victim of fanatical oppression.

Having expected to be taken straight to the Tower, she was surprised to find herself being led to Whitehall. But Whitehall, she reflected gloomily, stood on the riverbank and by water the Tower was easily and secretly accessible. She was given apartments which overlooked the river and there left in complete isolation. She asked to see the queen, but Mary remained aloof. Monotonously day followed day, and time, with the sluggish flowing of the river, seemed endless. Mary, she thought, was afraid to face her, afraid to charge her with any specific crime, afraid to set her free.

"Am I to be left here till I die?" she raged.

She fell ill at length. There was no pretense this time, no play acting. The nightmares of earlier years returned, but with a difference; Seymour dominated them, grinning horribly, reminding her that he had once said God save England if her half sister ever mounted the throne.

Late one night, when she had lost all sense of time, Mrs. Ashley wakened her and whispered fearfully that she was commanded in the queen's name to rise and dress. Candles had been lit in the bedchamber and grotesque shadows bobbed on the walls. Lord Howard stood a few paces behind Mrs. Ashley, his face expressionless.

"Has the queen consented to receive me at last?" Elizabeth asked.

Howard shook his head. "Your Grace is required to make a short journey, by water."

"Ah, to the Tower!"

"To the Tower," he agreed.

Well, she had known it all along.

"By way of Traitor's Gate," he added.

Elizabeth roused herself then and looked at him scornfully.

"Many innocent people have entered that way," she said, "but none more innocent than I. Tell the queen that, my lord, and let her do her worst."

Chapter 15

Robin Dudley laughed softly in the darkness.

"Do you know why you were brought to the Tower, Bess?"

Elizabeth nodded. "As a warning that I might next be removed to the scaffold."

"As a warning, perhaps, but not too serious a one. Some people, I admit, would like to see your head roll—the more fanatical members of the queen's council, for instance—but not the queen herself. You were brought here because, in the Tower, you have no chance whatever of hatching a treasonous plot."

"Small chance I had of that at Whitehall!"

"Ah, but it was whispered that, devil-inspired as you are—a witch, one might almost say—you would quickly devise a means of poisoning the queen."

"If I were a witch," Elizabeth laughed, "Mary would never have mounted the throne."

Robin took her hand lightly in his. "How good to hear you laugh, Bess."

"It had a queer ring in my own ears," she said soberly. "It sounded like somebody else's laughter." She clung to his hand for a moment. "Robin, how do you, a prisoner like myself, know what you've just told me?"

"I have a little spy system of my own. Trusted servants bring me messages from trusted court officials."

"Officials who have no love for my sister, it seems!"

"True, Bess, and their number will grow."

Elizabeth had spent almost a month in the Tower and this was her first meeting with Robin. She had not expected him to be still alive, for Wyatt had gone to the block, as well as Jane Grey and her husband, Robin's elder brother Guilford. She

stared hard at Robin in the darkness. He had contrived this furtive midnight meeting after much effort, had in fact entered the walled-in garden, the restricted space where Elizabeth took her daily exercise, wearing the clothes of one of the guards.

"Robin," she said urgently, "this guard whose clothes you wear, is he to be fully trusted?"

"Apart from his greed for money," Robin reassured her, "he was once a page in your mother's service. He adored Anne Boleyn. Need I say more to put your mind at ease?"

"But the others," Elizabeth went on, "the trusted servants, the court officials—the thought of them troubles me sorely. Any one of them could be a spy setting a trap. For God's sake take care, Robin. If my sister were to hear of this secret meeting, a plot would be suspected, and that might be the end for both of us."

Robin chuckled softly. "Dear Bess, my horoscope, even if I *was* born an hour later than you, is just as promising as yours. There's no sharp ax in store for either of us."

After hearing Mass the next morning, the daily attendance being in strict accordance with Mary's orders, Elizabeth found herself confronted by three members of the council. She had been questioned before by the council and thought instantly: They know about my meeting with Robin. However, where earlier she had been browbeaten, this time she was addressed quite gently, even with deference. They were anxious, they said, to know her attitude to the queen's proposed marriage with Prince Philip of Spain. She replied that though her own attitude to anything the queen might do counted for nothing, she wished her sister all happiness with Philip or any other prince.

"We may take it, then, that Your Grace approves most heartily?"

She thought she saw what they were getting at. If she approved "most heartily" and her words were spread throughout the country, her cause would be weakened among the Protestant factions.

"Gentlemen," she said sadly, "I entered this place by way of Traitor's Gate. How can I, a state prisoner, express either approval or disapproval? I haven't the right."

"We had hoped," one of them said smoothly, "that Your

Grace, happy for the queen's sake, would write a letter expressing delight at the thought of Her Majesty's coming marriage."

"Such delight as this royal marriage may hold," she was unable to resist saying, "will surely be the queen's—and Prince Philip's."

One of them laughed shortly, but under the reproving gaze of the other two turned his laughter into a hurried little cough.

Exhilarated by this victory, insignificant as it was, Elizabeth waited eagerly for the next meeting with Robin. It took place a week later, in the same place and at the same time.

"I have news, Bess, good news!" he greeted her.

"I'm to be released from the Tower?"

"Not yet, but I think you can count on release when Prince Philip arrives. The main thing is this: you're safer now than at any time since Mary ascended the throne. The poor woman is desperately anxious to marry Philip and would agree to almost any condition he might impose. There are several conditions. The one that concerns us most is this: no harm is to come to you, or Philip will break off the negotiations."

"Are you sure of your facts, Robin?"

"I am!"

"But why should Philip of Spain care whether I live or die?"

"He realizes that there'll be trouble enough getting the Spanish alliance accepted by England without adding fuel to the smoldering Protestant embers by sending you to the block."

Elizabeth laughed weakly. "So I owe my life to Mary's eagerness to get herself a husband!"

Soon after this, word reached her that the queen was ill, her condition being so serious that she could no longer attend to state affairs. It was even rumored, Robin reported at their third meeting, that Mary was close to death.

"And if she dies—!" he whispered exultantly.

For a moment Elizabeth was ashamed that she should be counting on Mary's death as a solution to all her problems, but then she realized that they were England's problems too, and with such a thought the shame soon passed.

Next morning the lieutenant of the Tower waited on her. He was a kindly man and had done what he could to provide

Elizabeth with any small comforts that were available in the Tower. She saw at once that he was grave-faced and wondered excitedly if he brought the news she was half-expecting.

"Your Grace," he said, his voice shaken by the distress he clearly felt, "I have here a privy council order for your immediate execution.

Nonplused, Elizabeth could only stare at him blankly.

"Let me see it," she said at length.

He gave it to her and she read it quickly.

"It lacks the queen's signature," she pointed out.

"True, Your Grace. The lord chancellor, with the queen desperately ill, has taken it upon himself to order your execution."

The lord chancellor, Bishop Gardiner, once her father's friend, was now her most active enemy on Mary's privy council. He had preached against her and had tried, with all the viciousness of his nature, to have her excluded from the succession. Failure in this, for Parliament had insisted on observing the wishes expressed in her father's will, had increased his enmity. Gardiner, therefore, must know that if Mary died he would have little hope of mercy at the hands of her legal successor. This, then, was an attempt to preserve his position in the government.

"If the queen dies, if I die, and with Lady Jane Grey already dead," she asked, "who would come to the throne?"

"The little Queen of Scotland, Your Grace, or so I assume."

Elizabeth nodded slowly. That would certainly please Bishop Gardiner. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, was still in France. She was twelve years old, a fact even more pleasing to Gardiner, for with a child queen on the throne, he would have every chance of clinging to the power he now possessed.

"To whom are you answerable as lieutenant of the Tower," Elizabeth asked—"the queen, or the council?"

"The queen, Your Grace, but during Her Majesty's illness, the council, I fear."

She looked at him carefully. He was her friend, perhaps her steadfast ally, but she knew nevertheless that she was called upon to fight desperately for her life.

"Do you want to follow me to the block?" she asked.

He smiled wryly. "I, too, see the possibility of that, if the queen lives. However, I am well versed in the trickeries of the past, one of which Bishop Gardiner may be practicing even now."

"You think the queen already dead, her death concealed until this order is carried out?"

"Such a thought *had* crossed my mind, Your Grace."

Elizabeth looked at him steadily. "Would you risk a little delay until you learn for certain whether the queen is alive or dead?"

"By God, yes!" he cried suddenly.

He withdrew hurriedly and was absent for almost an hour. When he returned he was smiling grimly. He had spoken, he reported, with the queen's personal physician, who was a close friend of his. The queen was alive, but her condition was indeed critical. She was closely guarded against intrusion. Affairs of state were entirely in Bishop Gardiner's hands.

"So the position is unchanged," Elizabeth said, her nerve beginning to fail her. "You are still answerable to Gardiner and his order is immediate execution."

The lieutenant fell to his knees before her.

"I would rather die than obey him," he said brokenly.

Elizabeth remembered Prince Philip's attitude.

"If the queen lives, my death will please none but Gardiner. That I should live is a condition imposed by Prince Philip. He would break off the marriage negotiations if I went to the block."

"Your Grace is better informed than I."

Her heart sank at this. It almost seemed as if Robin had been misinformed. And if Mary recovered, perhaps she might be pleased to know that Gardiner had issued an order which she had hesitated to put in effect herself.

"Your Grace," the lieutenant cried, rising quickly to his feet, "my agitation nearly deprived me of my senses. My friend, the physician, naturally has free access to Her Majesty. I'll go to him again. He in turn will take the order to the queen. It will be better to do that than return it to Bishop Gardiner, asking for Her Majesty's signature. Signatures are easily forged."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said simply.

But the moment he had gone she began to wonder if Mary, confronted by the order, would be tempted to sign it. It was a gamble; everything depended on whether Robin's information was reliable. And as she waited, she tried to take heart in another thought: the state of the country was surely too precarious for Mary to risk signing the order.

After an absence of two hours, during which Elizabeth hovered between high hope and black despair, the lieutenant returned. There was nothing grim about his smile this time. He was even laughing and joking with the soldierly-looking gentleman who accompanied him.

"Your Grace," he said, "permit me to introduce Sir Henry Bedingfeld. Her Majesty has now placed you in Sir Henry's care."

"Care?" Elizabeth asked.

Sir Henry bowed. "I am charged to give Your Grace every possible protection, and have at my disposal here in the Tower a hundred men recruited from the queen's personal guard."

The lieutenant lingered until Sir Henry had withdrawn. His eyes were shining; there were tears on his cheeks.

"Well?" Elizabeth demanded.

"Her Majesty was much disturbed. She tore up the order. She was heard to gasp that its very existence was enough to prevent Prince Philip from coming to England. She commanded that no one should breathe a word about it."

Elizabeth sank weakly into a chair. So Robin had not been misinformed. She laughed wildly in an attempt to cover the tears of relief which had sprung to her eyes. Thank God for Philip of Spain!

"Her Majesty seems to have gained a new strength from this unfortunate incident," the lieutenant went on. "She is expected now to make a rapid recovery. Your Grace will remain in the Tower a little longer, but will soon be permitted to retire to one of the royal residences in the country."

"Freely?"

"Sir Henry will accompany you."

Elizabeth laughed happily. Even if a jailer was considered necessary, her head was still firmly on her shoulders and that, for the present, was all that mattered.

III. Philip of Spain

Chapter 16

"A most damnable climate," Philip remarked.

Elizabeth looked at him curiously. Though his words suggested indignation, he had uttered them with the utmost mildness. Indeed, his emotionless manner suggested that, after due consideration, he had made a statement of fact, that and no more.

"We in England find it pleasant enough," she said. "In any case, Highness, it is winter."

"It had the feel of winter when I landed at Southampton last July. The rain, I swear, was charged with icicles. A hardy race, you English. What, I wonder, is responsible for the hardness? The climate itself, or some hidden, inherent strength?"

While he weighed the question thoughtfully, Elizabeth studied his attire. The black velvet of his jerkin was edged with silk braid and decorated with tiny silver bugles, while the doublet beneath, as revealed by the close-fitting sleeves and the pleated slops, was of yellow satin. His short Spanish cloak, black velvet lined with black satin, hung modestly from his sloping shoulders. His fine woollen hose were of a paler yellow, and just beneath his left knee was a square-patterned garter in gold and blue. His legs were so handsome that she began to wonder if there was padding beneath the hose. She glanced down at the skirt of her plain gray surcote and felt quite dowdy. Dowdy, she told herself, but by no means intimidated.

"Well?" she asked.

"Both," he said, coming to a reluctant decision.

This was Elizabeth's first meeting with Mary's husband. He had arrived near the end of July, and five days later the marriage had taken place. She wondered what had passed through his mind at the sight of Mary. He was twenty-eight, ten years younger than his wife. The queen must have been something of a shock to him, but probably, having weighed her dismaying appearance against the political advantages of the alliance, he had expressed himself satisfied.

"Shall we continue to converse in French?" he asked.

"Since my French is better than my Spanish, yes."

He inclined his head. "Your Grace has heard the good news?"

"To which good news do you refer?"

"The queen's pregnancy, what else?"

"Ah yes."

Actually the only good news, so far as Elizabeth was concerned, was Robin Dudley's release from the Tower, and apparently she had Philip to thank for it. Not of course that he had known he might be pleasing her. He had merely persuaded Mary to release a number of state prisoners, Robin among them, in celebration of the royal pregnancy. It was a gesture intended to induce in the Protestants a more kindly attitude to the Spanish alliance, but whether it would achieve the desired result was another matter. Elizabeth, however, had not seen Robin since his release, for he had been sent straight to the Netherlands, there to take part in the war which Spain and England were now engaged upon with France.

Elizabeth also had Philip to thank for the measure of freedom which she now enjoyed. She had eventually been taken from the Tower to Woodstock Palace, still in the care of Sir Henry Bedingfeld, but Philip had insisted upon her being brought here to Hampton Court for the Christmas festivities.

"Did you have a pleasant journey from Woodstock?" Philip asked.

"Pleasant enough, in spite of the damnable weather."

"Were you carried this time in a litter?"

Elizabeth looked at him closely. Mary had obviously told him the story of the earlier forced journey by litter. Did his words suggest that he regarded her plea of illness on that occasion as a ruse? It was impossible to say. His gray eyes told

her nothing. He was fingering his yellow beard and seemed once again to be weighing the pros and cons of an important problem.

"Do you think it likely," he said at last, "that you and I might become friends?"

"Why not, Highness? We seem to have made a promising start."

"The correct form of address," he sighed, "is Majesty."

Elizabeth hid a smile. His marriage had made him King of England, Mary had insisted upon it, but though Mary wanted a coronation for him, such a move had not yet been thought wise.

"I care little myself how you address me," he added, "but my wife is touchy. In any case, I ceased to be merely a prince before I came to England. My father, remember, created me King of Naples."

"That was handsome of the emperor, Your Majesty," Elizabeth said solemnly.

Philip shook his head. "My father merely considered it necessary that I should be equal in rank with the Queen of England before I married her. And I considered it necessary myself." He gave Elizabeth a patient look. "I doubt if I could be called a man of deep perception, but I suspect that in your persistent use of 'Highness' you were expressing a certain defiance—the defiance, in short, which seems a pronounced failing of the English when in the presence of those they choose to call foreigners."

"I was, at all events, expressing a certain defiance," Elizabeth admitted candidly.

Philip ran his hand over his broad forehead and pressed back his yellow hair. Elizabeth almost giggled. He was weighing yet another important problem. After a moment he reached a decision, and though no smile touched his lips, his eyes seemed momentarily to soften.

"On occasions such as this when we are alone together—I want a real friendship, you see—you have my permission to call me Philip."

Elizabeth inclined her head gravely. "And you have mine to call me Elizabeth. After all, Philip, you are now my brother-in-law."

"Brother-in-law . . ." he pondered. "Mary is your half sister. I, therefore, am your half brother-in-law."

"Of course."

There was laughter in her voice but Philip seemed not to notice it. Remarking that she was a young woman of much wisdom, he bowed gravely, added that they would meet again soon, and withdrew from her presence.

Watching him go, noting the surprising gracefulness of his movements, Elizabeth shook her head in mock despair. What a pity that so well-mannered a man, a quite handsome one too, should have no sense of humor. She laughed at the passing thought that his equanimity was something of a challenge. I must force him to lose his temper one day, she decided; that, surely, will make him more human.

Having arrived at Hampton Court that morning, she had not yet been received by the queen, nor had Mary, even through Philip, sent any message of welcome. It almost seemed as if her sister, compelled against her will to permit this visit, was inclined to be sulky. A ridiculous attitude, Elizabeth thought, and went at once from her own apartments to the queen's. There, however, she found herself turned back by the guard; obviously so far as Mary was concerned, she was still in disfavor.

The next morning Bishop Gardiner waited upon her. He was still lord chancellor. His power, in spite of the death warrant he had issued, was in no way diminished.

"I trust, my lord," she greeted him haughtily, "that you are here to conduct me to the queen's presence."

Gardiner smiled thinly. "Gladly would I do that, Your Grace, and gladly would the queen receive you, but first you must confess your fault."

Elizabeth sighed wearily. It was the same old demand, the demand that had echoed in her ears for months. Always, by this councilor and that, she had been urged to confess her fault, and her reply had always been the same: she knew of no fault to confess.

"It would seem," she said angrily, "that a merry yuletide lies entrancingly before me!"

"Confess your fault and real merriness will be yours."

"I have no fault to confess, my lord, but much fault to find in the way you use me!"

Gardiner's eyes narrowed. "This stubborn boldness implies but one thing, Your Grace."

"And what is that, my lord bishop?"

"A determination to place Her Majesty in the wrong. Your attitude suggests, as ever, that you were wrongfully imprisoned."

This, Elizabeth thought, was a new departure. The queen could do no wrong. Therefore, since Philip had evidently urged "forgiveness," Mary was insisting first that an offense against her should be admitted. Or was it merely Gardiner who was insisting upon it? And once a "confession" had been made, Gardiner would be in a position later to charge her with treason on the evidence of her own words.

"Send me back to the Tower," she cried, "send me to the block, if you must—if you dare—I have nothing to confess!"

The door closed with a decisive snap. Neither Elizabeth nor Gardiner had heard it open, nor noticed the soft light step of the man who had entered.

"Well spoken," said Philip, his voice expressionless. "I admire spirit in a woman. I admire it as much as I despise hectoring in a man. In short, Gardiner, enough of this browbeating."

Bowing his head, Gardiner remained silent.

"You may withdraw, my lord," Philip added.

Without a word Gardiner stalked angrily from the room, his skirts swishing violently about his legs.

Philip offered Elizabeth his arm. "The queen will receive you immediately. Conversation among the three of us will take place in Italian."

"Why Italian, Philip?"

"You speak it as well as you speak French. Mary and I always converse in Italian. Her French is uncertain and she has forgotten most of the Spanish she learned from her mother."

They found Mary sitting in a high-backed chair, her hands, covered with diamond rings, lying loosely on the velvet-covered arms. She wore a gray-blue surcoat with a high pointed collar, and beneath it a gown of blue and silver brocade. Her eyes,

veiled and dreamy when Philip and Elizabeth entered the room, came quickly to life at the sight of Philip.

"The father of my child," she whispered gloatingly and seemed hardly to notice Elizabeth. "Such a handsome father, which surely means that my child will be handsome too. But more than that! The finest king this country will ever know, I vow!"

Embarrassed by this outburst, Elizabeth glanced from Mary to Philip. He was looking patiently at his wife; if he felt embarrassment too, he showed no sign of it. Mary had aged since Elizabeth had last seen her, so much so that in her presence Philip looked like a mere youth.

"The Lady Elizabeth is here," he said. "Your Majesty expressed a wish to receive her."

Mary gave Elizabeth a casual look. "I did?"

"At my request," Philip added.

Mary was ogling him shamelessly. "Of a certainty I'd grant my gallant husband any request. His slightest wish is law to me." She turned to Elizabeth. "How you must envy me!" She sprang to her feet and linked her arm through Philip's. "Look well upon us, the three of us! Nurse your envy to the full."

"The three of you?" Elizabeth stammered.

Mary thrust out her stomach. "How proud I am! The proudest woman in this realm of England. Already I can feel my son stirring within me. He leaps and bounds, anxious to burst forth and confront the world which in God's good time will be his, all his!"

Elizabeth avoided her sister's eyes. A month of pregnancy and this ecstatic outburst! Mary was surely hysterical, hysterical to the point of craziness. Poor Philip, she thought, poor Philip.

"Why did I send for Elizabeth?" Mary asked.

"For the purpose," Philip said, "of discussing with her the long-delayed question of marriage."

"Ah yes!" Mary looked coldly at Elizabeth. "I hope your sojourn in the Tower has brought you to your senses."

Elizabeth smiled brightly. "Did you send me to the Tower because I refused to take a husband?"

"As stubborn as ever, I can see that at a glance!" Mary cried.

"However, I shall strive to keep my temper. After all, why should I lose my temper when I feel so sorry for you?"

"Sorry for me?" Elizabeth echoed.

"The birth of my son will exclude you from the succession forever."

"The child may well be a daughter," Philip pointed out.

"The sex of the child matters not at all," Mary told him. "My father's will refers only to the heirs of my body, whatever their sex. I expect a son, and I expect him to marry in due course and have children of his own. In any event, Elizabeth is excluded, as I said, forever."

"In that case, does it matter whether I marry?" Elizabeth asked quietly.

Mary smiled slyly. "I want to see you happy."

"Then let me choose my own husband if and when I want one."

"The duty of choosing a husband for you is mine."

"Is your mind still set on the Prince of Piedmont?"

"It is, Elizabeth."

So the situation was unchanged. Indeed it was aggravated by Mary's pregnancy. With the exclusion of a Protestant successor the Protestants would plot rising after rising. It was more necessary than ever, Elizabeth saw, that she should be married to a foreign prince and removed from England.

"A wider choice is possible," Philip said, in precise tones. "I myself could gather together a few eligible princes."

"How many of English birth?" Elizabeth asked him.

The faintest hint of anger crossed his face, and Elizabeth remembered that it would be amusing to make him lose his temper.

"I refuse to marry a foreigner," she added.

"A stanch patriot, the Lady Elizabeth," he commented calmly.

"Patriotism has no part of it," Mary exclaimed. "Stubborn defiance, that and no more! My wretched father at his worst! To show compassion for his bastard daughter is a waste of time. Would to God I had allowed Bishop Gardiner to have his way. Remove her from my sight, Philip, for pity's sake!"

Screaming now, Mary had lapsed into English, of which language Philip understood not a word. For a moment he

looked confused, then firmly took Mary by the arm and forced her back to her chair.

"Remove her, remove her!" Mary insisted.

"Her Majesty is commanding you to remove me," Elizabeth told him, in French.

"Remove yourself," he said tersely, "but wait in the gallery."

Elizabeth withdrew and, lingering in the gallery, listened to Mary's continued screams of rage. She tried to tell herself that she was quite unmoved by the disastrous interview but, to her annoyance, her heart was palpitating and her hands were shaking violently. Presently, when Mary's screaming had died away, Philip emerged. He was mopping his brow and looked almost human.

"First you were to be sent back to the Tower," he sighed, "then to Woodstock, but now, since I think that at Woodstock you were not very happy, you may choose your own place of residence."

"Woodstock was only irksome because I was a prisoner there."

"I see no further need for Sir Henry Bedingfeld and his hundred men. You may go where you please in complete freedom."

"I like Hatfield best. I'll go to Hatfield."

Philip came close then to smiling. "You might at least say, 'Thank you, Philip.'"

"Forgive me."

They looked at each other for a moment in silence.

"How in heaven's name did you succeed in pacifying her?" Elizabeth asked.

"By a warning and a threat. I warned her that these rages are bad for the child she carries in her womb, and I threatened to leave England unless she controlled herself."

"Am I to leave Hampton Court at once?"

"You are, my dear."

His "my dear" made her look at him closely.

"Go to Hatfield," he added. "I understand that the air there is excellent. I like an attractive girl to have color in her cheeks. It makes her more—attractive."

God's precious soul, Elizabeth thought comically, is it possible that Philip is falling in love with me?

"This is good-by, then," she said solemnly.

"Good-by?" He fingered his beard reflectively. "Hardly that, Elizabeth. We shall meet again, you and I, at Hatfield."

Chapter 17

Elizabeth looked up from her book as Mrs. Ashley came bustling excitedly into the room. Intent on her reading, she had taken little notice of the stir in the courtyard, the clatter of hoofs, the shouting of the grooms, but noting the governess' flushed face, she wondered if the news they were all expecting had come at last. For Mary was ill again and a premature birth was considered inevitable.

"Well, what is it, Ashley?"

"The king, Your Grace, none other than His Majesty the King!"

Philip entered her study briskly with a servant close on his heels. As she fell dutifully to her knees, Elizabeth noticed that the man was carrying a large valise. Surely Philip, tired as he might be of Mary's tantrums, hadn't come to Hatfield with the intention of making a lengthy stay?

Philip raised her to her feet and kissed her on the brow, a chaste, brotherly peck.

"I see no need for you to kneel before me," he said. "I am still your king in name only. No crown has yet been placed on my head."

His tone suggested that he was merely stating a fact, but, Elizabeth sensed his pique. There had been more talk lately of a special coronation ceremony, but Parliament had been troublesome and the ticklish question was still in abeyance.

With a curt nod Philip dismissed Mrs. Ashley and his manservant. "But leave the valise," he commanded.

Elizabeth laughed lightly. "Have you fled court for Hatfield, simply because England still refuses you a crown?"

"Certainly not. My visit here is a brief one, made, one might

say, in passing. Have you been happy at Hatfield, Elizabeth?"

"Happy enough. Reading has occupied most of my time."

"So I assume, otherwise you would have made more of your appearance. Your gown is more suited to a woman twice your age. However, that can easily be rectified. Open the valise, Elizabeth. You will find a present inside."

"From Mary?"

"No, my dear, from me."

Elizabeth opened the valise and to her amazement discovered a gown of plain gray velvet cunningly shot with green. She unfolded it and held it against her body. The simplicity of the cut was belied by the seed pearls with which the bodice was threaded.

"This is most kind of you," she said, quite at a loss.

Philip nodded his agreement. "The color will go well with the red of your hair, and the seed pearls will increase the deep, almost black shade of your eyes. The fullness of the skirt requires a large farthingale. Mrs. Ashley will doubtless procure one for you. I shall have a word with her before I leave. Your station requires, nay, demands, a more stylish dressing."

Nettled, Elizabeth was half inclined to explain that while her heart ached often enough for stylish clothes, she had long ago decided to dress modestly, even dowdily, in order to excite the sympathy of the people, but that, of course, was out of the question.

"I am allowed scarcely enough money for the upkeep of my household," she told him. "Hence the miserable condition of my personal wardrobe."

"You shall be granted a substantial increase," said Philip, looking at her critically. "Hatfield, I see, has been good for you. There is a lively color in your cheeks."

"My health is much improved."

"To the point of radiance, Elizabeth. I wish I could say the same of Mary."

"Oh come, Philip, a woman heavy with child—"

"Childbearing is a natural phenomenon. It should carry with it a very special radiance. However, Mary has been ill again."

"Yes, so we've been told, and you are expecting a premature birth."

"Mary is somewhat recovered. We shall have to wait a little longer, it seems, for the birth of the child."

There was an awkward pause.

"Did you call, in passing, to tell me of Mary's recovery?" she asked, feeling a desperate need to keep the conversation flowing.

"By no means, Elizabeth. I called, in passing, to tell you that I myself, after much thought, have found a husband for you."

This cold-blooded statement was shocking to her pride. The dress, then, was merely a bribe! "I find myself under no obligation to obey the orders of an uncrowned king," Elizabeth said softly, determined now to make him lose his temper.

"Crowned or otherwise," Philip said, just as softly, "I am determined to marry you to Philibert Emmanuel of Savoy."

"Philibert Emmanuel!" Elizabeth echoed and found it impossible not to giggle.

"A cousin of mine," Philip added.

"But Philibert Emmanuel!" Elizabeth repeated and burst into peals of laughter. "What a ridiculous name! How would I be required to address him? Dear Philibert? Dear Emmanuel? Or the whole amazing mouthful?"

She waited, staring hopefully at Philip, but still there was no sign of humor, still less of anger. He was simply turning over the question calmly in his mind.

"Naturally," he told her, "you will respect his rank and call him Highness. Then, too, you will call him husband. And finally, having learned to love him, you may, if you wish, address him by an intimate pet name of your choosing."

"Does the queen ever call you Phil?" Elizabeth asked solemnly.

"Never."

"Phil would do for Philibert, too, but perhaps Bert would be better."

"Whichever you wish."

Elizabeth looked at him frankly. "Forgive me for misleading you. I'll never address him even as Highness, for I'll never meet him. I won't countenance a proxy marriage because I'll never marry a man I haven't met."

Philip came close to smiling; that is to say, his lips twitched, and his nostrils too, as if a sneezing fit were imminent.

"I expected opposition, Elizabeth and I came prepared for it. Philibert Emmanuel has been summoned to London. You too are summoned there. What's more, you'll meet him, talk with him and, whether or not you like him, agree to be his wife."

"Who commands this, you or Mary?"

"I command it, my dear Elizabeth. You will present yourself at Whitehall a week from today."

"A week from today, I may not be fit to travel. My health is most precarious."

"Fit or not, I expect obedience. In case of need, a comfortable litter will be provided."

"I was intent on making you lose your temper," Elizabeth said sadly, "but I have only succeeded in almost losing my own."

"Even if you throw yourself on the floor and scream with rage, it will avail you nothing. Such an act, at your age would be undignified. Twenty-two is an age when a woman is more than ripe for marriage."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I can think of nothing else."

Elizabeth, scowling at him, felt a pressing need to have the last word.

"I'll come to London, Philip. I'll even wear your present when I get there. As for the litter, it won't be needed. I'll sit my horse like the Tudor that I am."

Chapter 18

Elizabeth's progress from Hatfield to London had now reached Whitehall, and before dismounting she glanced back at her suite. A hundred or more ladies and gentlemen had been gathered together, and a brave showing they made, a splash of brilliance, with the guard of honor in scarlet coats slashed richly with black velvet. She herself wore virgin white; she wore it deliberately, knowing that it would make her more conspicuous. She wanted to show the people of London who cheered her

in the streets that whatever new harshness awaited her, she was entering Whitehall innocent as the day she was born.

Apartments had been prepared for her, and to these she retired after sending word of her arrival to Philip and Mary—even though so spectacular an arrival could hardly have gone unnoticed! While she waited, her ladies fussed about her, removing the white gown and replacing it with Philip's present. She added a touch of her own by donning a close-fitting green toque threaded also with seed pearls, and from the jewelry which her stepmother Catherine had left her she selected a diamond bracelet.

At length Philip came to greet her and conducted her, with surprising obsequiousness, to the queen's apartments. He whispered almost gallantly that the gown became her even more than he had expected, and that the toque was a touch of genius.

Mary was in bed, propped up on numerous pillows, while on her brow was a cloth soaked in vinegar. Her cheeks were hollow, her lips dry and colorless. She stared angrily at her visitor and then burst out: "How like your mother you are! You grow more like her each year of your unfortunate life. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-two in September."

"You look older. Twenty-six at least. You look like your mother at that age. She was twenty-six when you were born. I was present at your birth. Seventeen I was, but too innocent to comprehend the perfidy which had already been committed. But enough of that for the moment. Why did Philip bring you to court?"

"His Majesty," Elizabeth said lightly, "wants to marry me to his cousin, Philibert Emmanuel of Savoy."

To her surprise Mary looked angrily at Philip.

"And why, pray, your cousin?"

Philip shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I consider it an excellent match. Elizabeth is stubbornly set against it, but I think we might persuade her in the end."

"How?" Mary demanded.

"My dear, you have constantly refused to accept the ruling of your late father's will, but if you change your mind and

freely admit Elizabeth to the succession, Elizabeth, I feel sure, will gladly marry my cousin."

Bribery again, Elizabeth thought, but bribery this time of considerable importance. She glanced quickly at Mary and saw in amazement that her face was alarmingly flushed.

"To admit Elizabeth to the succession," she gasped, "is the only thing I would ever refuse you."

"My dear Mary, it will cost you nothing."

"Nothing! It would cost me my integrity."

"But please consider for a moment what will happen if Elizabeth survives you and your children, yet is excluded from the succession. The Queen of Scotland, Mary Stuart, would then come to the English throne."

"A goodly Catholic heir, remember that, Philip!"

"You fail to grasp my reasoning," Philip said patiently. "Mary Stuart will soon be married to the French dauphin. Scotland will be dominated even more than now by France. France and Spain are enemies. And I would hate to see a queen of England subservient to French rule. The only safeguard is to marry Elizabeth to my cousin and at the same time restore her to the succession."

"I won't do it, Philip, by God's holy name I won't!"

"After the birth of our child," Philip said patiently, "the good sense of my argument will become obvious to you."

"Are you suggesting that my pregnancy has unbalanced me?"

"My dear Mary—"

"You are, Philip, you are!" Mary screamed. "But I was never more sane, never!"

She flung aside the vinegar cloth and all but leaped from her bed. Deeply agitated and muttering indistinctly to herself, she strode barefooted about the bedchamber, her nightgown billowing out one moment, clinging briefly to her body the next. Elizabeth, shaken by the suspicion which came to her as she watched, glanced quickly at Philip, but he was deep in thought and had failed to see what she had noticed. Mary, eight months after the momentous announcement, showed no real sign of pregnancy. A moment later, however, with Elizabeth's eyes lingering on her again, a sly look crossed her face and before

snatching up her dressing gown, she thrust out her stomach defiantly.

Elizabeth turned to the window. Why this extraordinary pretense? Had Mary announced a mock pregnancy in order to keep Philip, the supposed father-to-be, attentive at her side? It seemed scarcely likely; Mary, under normal circumstances, was both honest and intelligent. But were the circumstances normal? Mary had passionately wanted a child and had been quite hysterical when, within only a month of her announcement, she had spoken of the new life she felt stirring within her. Well, Elizabeth thought, whatever the queen had first believed, or wanted to believe, the truth was known to her now. And this explained her refusal to admit her Protestant half sister to the succession.

"Elizabeth!" Mary cried harshly.

Elizabeth turned from the window. Mary, with the dressing gown loose about her body, was now seated in a chair. She had struggled with herself and was almost calm again.

"Look at her, Philip," she went on, "and who do you see? You see her mother, Anne Boleyn, but do you see anything of the man she so fondly thinks was her father?"

"*Thinks?*" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"The hair is much the same," Philip said, "and from what I have heard of the late King Henry, she has the same way of standing, the same way of thrusting up her chin."

"Bah! The hair is a mere coincidence. For the rest, she was fond of mimicking him and has been careful since childhood to cultivate some of his attitudes."

"My dear—" Philip began.

"Wait! Let me finish! I spoke just now of my integrity. Nothing in this world or heaven itself could ever force me to admit to the succession the daughter of Anne Boleyn and a court musician."

Elizabeth looked at Mary in horror. "This is infamous, infamous!"

"Your mother's conduct was infamous. One of her many lovers was Mark Smeaton, a pretty dancer and an apt musician at my father's court. Smeaton was your father. Oh, I know your

mother was at times driven crazy by my father's impatience for a child, but that is no reason for me to impose upon England a queen with not a drop of royal blood in her veins."

Elizabeth struggled to steady herself. She was close to tears. Nothing in her life had ever hurt or humiliated her as desperately as this. Harry of England *was* my father, she kept telling herself, he was, he was, he was!

"You have proof of this?" Philip asked Mary.

"Elizabeth's appearance is proof in itself. There were ugly whispers at the time of her birth—though as I said before, I failed in my innocence to understand them fully. Mark Smeaton, remember, was charged with committing adultery with the Boleyn creature. He confessed his guilt and went to the block."

Elizabeth said quickly, "Did you ever meet him?"

"Naturally."

"Frequently, perhaps?"

"I took dancing lessons from him, as did your mother."

"Were you in love with him?"

Mary's eyes flashed angrily. "The cunning of the girl! Her mother all over again! Love never touched my heart till Philip came to England."

Philip cleared his throat; the sound had in it the faintest hint of distaste.

"We are straying from the point," he said. "Why, if you suspected all this, have we never heard of it before?"

"Real proof reached me only recently. I received a communication from Rome. It has been well known there for many years, that Anne Boleyn, desperate to bear a child, took Smeaton to her bed."

"Real proof . . ." Philip said, with the faintest of sighs.

Elizabeth stepped forward quickly. The shock was passing, though the hurt remained.

"Mary—" she began.

"Wait!" Philip commanded. "Enough has been said for the present."

"More than enough," Mary declared. "Remove Smeaton's daughter from my presence. Send her back to Hatfield."

Elizabeth seemed about to say something in return, but Philip took her firmly by the arm and led her from the bedchamber.

Mary's laughter came suddenly then, on a high, hysterical note, and though Philip quickly closed the door behind him the terrible noise still echoed from within the room.

Back in Elizabeth's apartments he said quietly, "This has been very distressing for you. Fortunately there were no witnesses, apart from you and me. I shall take steps to prevent a similar outburst happening again."

"Thank you, Philip," Elizabeth said dully.

"I beg you to be patient. The queen is not the first woman to suffer strange fancies during pregnancy."

Rousing herself Elizabeth said, "If there were rumors at my birth they would have reached my father's ears. My mother was charged with many vile acts, and my father, anxious to see her condemned, would have added for good measure this other accusation. As for this information from Rome, it would have been made public long ago, since Rome always hated my father."

"It appears still to be secret information."

"You think Mary invented the story?"

"Possibly."

"You believe me to be my father's daughter?"

"If by 'father' you mean Henry Tudor, yes."

"Thank you, Philip."

He inclined his head. "I promise you this: I shall do all I can to prevent Mary from spreading this story."

"Thank you again."

"Thank me, Elizabeth, by agreeing to marry my cousin."

"The queen has forbidden it."

"Ah, that stubbornness again."

"The queen's will is law."

"True, but the queen, after the child is born, will become a normal woman. Then it will be easy to make her see the good sense of what I propose. Marry my cousin and I promise to have you placed legally in the line of succession."

Elizabeth looked at him closely. Obviously he believed in Mary's pregnancy; he expected any day now to have a son or daughter.

She said: "My father's will placed me legally in the line of succession."

"Mary, if left entirely to herself, will eventually succeed in setting it aside."

"Let her!"

"A new act of Parliament would leave you unperturbed?"

"Parliament has already refused to exclude me. I place my faith in the strength of public opinion."

Philip, fingering his beard, looked at her in silence for a long moment. His temper, if he had a temper, seemed under excellent control.

Softly he said, "When the child is born the Lady Elizabeth will be—dear me, what is that English phrase of yours? Ah yes! When the child is born the Lady Elizabeth will be brought to heel."

"By you?"

"By me."

"No man has ever done that," she scoffed, "nor ever will!"

Chapter 19

"Dear me, the confusion of these contradictory messages," Mrs. Ashley complained. "First we hear that the queen has given birth to a son, then to a daughter, and now—" she looked plaintively at Thomas Parry, who had brought the latest message—"a son after all, you say?"

"A son after all," he affirmed.

"Did you learn this news at Whitehall?" Elizabeth asked him.

"It was impossible to get near the palace, Your Grace. The press of people was suffocating, but the cry 'A son!' echoed everywhere."

It was two weeks since Elizabeth had been sent back to Hatfield, and almost hourly she had waited for confirmation of her suspicion. Even now, in spite of what Parry said, she found it hard to believe that she had been wrong, and she began to

wonder if a new-born male baby had been smuggled into Whitehall.

That night she saw the red glow of the bonfires which had been lighted in the vicinity of Hatfield House, and learned that other bonfires, chain upon chain of them, were carrying the news to all parts of the realm. And yet, neither the next day nor the next did she receive official confirmation of the news and therefore clung stubbornly to her suspicion.

During the afternoon of the third day Philip himself appeared at Hatfield. He was attended by only a handful of his Spanish gentlemen, each of whom wore the most solemn expression, but his own face revealed no more than his usual impassivity.

"Another visit made in passing?" Elizabeth asked, when they were alone together.

"In passing," he agreed.

"One would have expected you to remain at court," she ventured, "watching jealously over your wife and child."

"Ah . . ."

"Is it a son, Philip, or a daughter?"

Philip hesitated, surprisingly at a loss for words.

"Twins, perhaps?"

"Neither a son nor a daughter," he said at last.

"One might have expected Mary to give birth to a wizened monkey," she laughed. "Was it that, Philip?"

"Such a suggestion," he pointed out logically, "is an insult, not to Mary, but to me."

"So it is," Elizabeth agreed. "Please forgive me."

"The truth of the matter is this," he went on: "a mistake was made. Mary was never with child. Apparently the physicians told her that some time ago, and while refusing to believe it, she forbade them to utter a word of it, even to me. Toward the end I began to have certain doubts, but a slight swelling was discernible, even when she forgot to thrust out her stomach." He sighed lightly. "The cause was dropsy. The physicians used spikenard, an old remedy, I understand. After several applications of the oil, the swelling disappeared."

"But the announcements, the bonfires!"

"She was hysterical. I was unable to restrain her."

Elizabeth found herself laughing gaily.

"I wonder if the physicians thought for a moment of using an older remedy than spikenard?"

"An older remedy?"

"In ancient Greece if a man suffered from dropsy his head was chopped off, then his body was strung up by the feet to allow the fluid to drain out. After that his head was replaced and he lived happily, the story goes, to a ripe old age."

"It is scarcely wise these days," Philip reproved, "to speak flippantly of heads being chopped off. However, you naturally feel a certain jubilation at my news."

"Naturally!" Elizabeth agreed and began to look searchingly about the room.

"Have you lost something?" Philip asked.

"I was looking for a valise. I thought you might have brought me another present."

"And so I have," he said and produced a long narrow jewel case. "This, my dear, in celebration of your coming birthday."

Elizabeth took the case and opened it.

"Pearls!" she cried.

Philip took the single strand of large, glowing pearls from the case and put it round Elizabeth's throat.

"As I expected," he decided, after a moment's contemplation, "they become you uncommonly well."

"Another bribe?" she challenged.

Philip shook his head. "A birthday present, as I say, and also, since I may have no further chance of calling here in passing, a parting gift."

"A *parting* gift? Are you going away?"

"Yes, Elizabeth. I feel a need to take an active part in the war with France. I shall leave for Brussels as soon as certain state affairs that hold my interest in London have been dealt with."

In a word, Elizabeth thought, he can stomach Mary no longer.

She watched him, not without sympathy, while he paced the room. The pacing surprised her. She had never seen him do this before. It seemed to her to suggest a certain agitation of mind, yet his face, when he turned to speak again, was quite immobile.

"I am much given to rumination," he announced. "It occurred to me recently, Elizabeth, that I might have married the wrong sister."

This came as so vast a surprise that Elizabeth could only whisper, "Have you reached a decision, Philip?"

"I have. I think it can be safely said that I did indeed marry the wrong sister."

"If you had married me," Elizabeth pointed out, "you would not have become even the *uncrowned* king of England."

"Not immediately." He walked to the window and back. "I pride myself on being a patient man, but in this instance I was not, I fear, sufficiently patient. Nor did I take the precaution of making careful inquiries about Mary's health—her life expectancy, shall we say. There is also another question."

"And that?"

"Am I, or am I not in love with you?"

Vastly surprised again, Elizabeth asked blankly, "Well, are you, or aren't you?"

"The answer is that I am not."

"You sound anything but sure, Philip."

He sounded perfectly sure, but the urge to provoke him was irresistible.

"I am not in love with you," he insisted, "yet I could be, if things were different."

"A feeling of love, then, can be called forth at will, under certain circumstances?"

"So I believe, Elizabeth. And things will be different, perhaps sooner than either of us expect. The physicians assure me that Mary has but a short time to live. That brings us to a final question, a question which is in fact a problem. The problem of how best to persuade Mary to acknowledge you openly and legally as her heir. I have already taken one step toward its solution."

"You mean—the act of denying her your presence?"

Philip nodded his agreement. "The poor creature is crazy with love for me. My absence will punish her sorely. My promised return, I feel confident, will guarantee your acknowledgment. If not, I shall go away again and again until my object is achieved."

The cold-bloodedness of his attitude filled Elizabeth with disgust.

"And so," she said quietly, "in order to keep England for Spain you have already selected your next wife."

Chapter 20

"I must thank you for obeying my summons so readily," Mary said stiffly. "It is my wish that you should remain for a time at court, but if you find no pleasure in it, my wish will not be enforced."

This, Elizabeth thought in amazement, was a change of heart indeed! Or was it merely a change of mind? Had she been summoned to join Mary at Hampton Court so that, in Philip's absence, a closer watch might be kept upon her? Was this really no more than a strategical ruse?

"You may be seated," Mary added. "There are things we must discuss, you and I."

The queen was in bed. Except that she had a slightly calmer look, her condition was much the same as when Elizabeth had seen her last.

"Did you arrive in time to witness the exodus?" Mary asked.

Elizabeth seated herself by the bed. Exodus, what a strange word to use!

"Several foreign gentlemen were leaving the palace when I arrived," she said. "It scarcely had the look of an exodus."

"But it was, nonetheless. You know the reason for it?"

"No," Elizabeth lied.

Not long after Philip's departure Mary had issued an official announcement confirming an earlier suspicion that she was pregnant again. The fact that she had used the word "again" had been sufficient to cast a doubt on the announcement, but nevertheless the foreign diplomats had eventually gathered at Hampton Court in order to offer the queen their congratulations. Here, as Elizabeth had learned on her own arrival, they had been met by those members of Philip's household who were

still at court and the truth had been revealed. This time the physicians had not been able to diagnose even dropsy. And so, the exodus.

"They think me merely hysterical," Mary said, her face beginning to work horribly. "No doubt, after the last time, the whole world holds the same opinion."

She turned and buried her head in the pillows. Her shoulders twitched convulsively. Elizabeth, in spite of her embarrassment and her memory of the hurt Mary had inflicted upon her at their last meeting, felt a surge of pity in her heart. She touched Mary gently on the shoulder.

"We women are queer creatures," she said consolingly, "apt at times to harbor strange fancies."

Mary lifted her head. Her cheeks were stained with tears, her eyes red and swollen.

"You too," she sobbed, "you too!" She controlled herself after a few moments and went on sadly: "How could I be pregnant when Philip laid not a finger on me before he went away? My desperate need of a child had become an obsession. It was a lie and I uttered it boldly. I even believed it for a while and was happy."

"Poor Mary," Elizabeth said.

"I do not want your pity! You may yet become like me, ailing and fanciful and at times half crazy. We had the same father, the same disease-ridden profligate. Your hair has a thin look. Is it falling out? That would be a sign of the inherited taint."

"My hair is as thick as it ever was!" Elizabeth cried, but her mind had seized mainly on one surprising phrase: "We had the same father. Last time we met, you were sure that Henry Tudor was not my father," she went on quickly. "Why this change?"

"The eyelashes fall out too."

"Mary!"

"Ah yes," Mary whispered, "Mark Smeaton, the court musician. I do have a vague memory of that unfounded accusation."

"Unfounded?"

"Philip wrote to me. I have his dear letter beneath my pillow. He reminded me of the unjust attack I made against your dead mother. He urged me to beg your forgiveness. That I shall never do, but I admit freely that I was unjust."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said faintly.

"It would be better for you if Smeaton had really been your father. He was a healthy young man. And yes, I did have a passion for him."

There was a lengthy silence, which made Elizabeth fidget in her chair. She would have much preferred to remain in peace at Hatfield, even though this forced appearance at court proved that Philip was making some progress with Mary. She reflected, too, that Bishop Gardiner, always so vindictive an enemy, had died last November, another reason, perhaps, for the queen's change of attitude.

"Elizabeth," Mary said suddenly, "if I acknowledge you my heir, will you do as Philip wishes and marry Philibert Emmanuel of Savoy?"

Elizabeth hesitated. Was Philip pressing for this again? She recalled her last conversation with him and smiled to herself. It was hardly likely. The suggestion was Mary's. She was hoping now to please her absent husband in all things.

"Once you acknowledge me," she said diplomatically, "I'll give the thought of marriage every consideration."

"I must have your promise first."

"You violently opposed such a marriage."

"My reason for that is now withdrawn. And naturally I would rather see England, the England of the future, allied with Spain than France."

So, for that matter, would Philip!

But Elizabeth looked at her sister indignantly. Of a sudden she was close to losing her temper. "Philip and his wanting England for Spain!" she cried. "English money and English lives are being squandered in France because of that! Spain using England, and France, with Scotland under her thumb, wanting to do the same. England, my father's Tudor England, torn between France and Spain! England for England, that's the pressing need! England free of foreign entanglements, England at peace both at home and abroad. If ever I'm queen—"

"If?" Mary questioned.

"When, I mean *when*!" Elizabeth challenged. "When I'm queen I'll say to my ministers, 'Gentlemen, no war, you understand, no war!'"

But Mary had lost interest.

"We shall never have peace at home while religious strife divides the country," she said broodingly. "The fault, some say, is mine. How ridiculous! And how unjust! People should listen, as I do, to the voice of God. Guided by Him, I have already done much to restore the old faith throughout the country. I shall do more, a great deal more. I'll go on and on till the end, stern always in my righteousness. If ever you're queen—and I say *if*, not *when*—you'll inherit peace at home, I promise."

Elizabeth returned to Hatfield after only a few days at court. She begged formal permission first, but Mary, her mind on other matters, merely said, "Do whatever you wish."

In the seclusion of the country she quickly resumed her studies, for study, along with the writing of poetry, had become an engrossing means of escape. At length Mrs. Ashley protested that too much reading and writing was bad for one's health, upon which, almost meekly, Elizabeth began to spend an hour or two each day, whatever the weather, riding about the countryside.

She also began to take a deeper interest in the affairs of her household and admitted to her service—a deliberate challenge to Mary—the sons and daughters of many of the Protestant nobles. She expected a sharp rebuke, but much to her surprise, none came. Philip again, she thought, Philip again!

Still in every other respect, Mary was pressing forward with her plans for the complete restoration of the old faith. With Catholicism the state religion, it seemed as if she intended to impose it upon everybody, whatever the cost. Two bishops, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, both active reformers under Henry VIII, were convicted of heresy and burned at the stake. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was the next important victim. There were many others, and while it could be argued that Mary was treating the Protestants no more harshly than Lord Protector Somerset had treated the Catholics, Elizabeth grew sick with horror at the senselessness of it all.

Many people blamed Philip and his Spanish influence; others looked to him for salvation. Elizabeth herself, taking the risk of her letter being intercepted, wrote to him and begged him to do all in his power to restrain the fanatical Mary. The courier

slipped unnoticed across the Channel and returned in safety. Philip replied that Mary's advisers, egging her on, were equally responsible. He promised to do what he could and urged the practice of much patience.

The same courier also brought Elizabeth an unexpected letter from Lord Robert Dudley. He was still abroad with the army. She remembered their brief meetings in the Tower, the help and comfort he had been to her there. Robin, dear, sweet Robin! He had often been in her thoughts; she had dedicated a recent poem to him, and at times was more than half convinced that she loved him passionately. She read his letter eagerly.

In a few short sentences he spoke of the measure of freedom he had heard she was now enjoying. He hoped with all his heart that she would continue to keep her head above water in the flood of hatred and suspicion which he feared still threatened her; he urged her to have no part in any plot designed for Mary's overthrow, and he ended gaily—Elizabeth could imagine him laughing gaily—with one of his astrological predictions. She was to be strong in heart, for it was written in the stars that her twenty-fifth birthday, and his, would be the beginning of the most important period of her life, *and his*.

Following this, Elizabeth learned from Thomas Parry, who had heard the story at Whitehall, that two separate deputations had waited on Philip at Brussels. He had been asked, on the one hand, to return at the head of an army, and, on the other, to return alone lest his arrival with an army should provoke civil war in England. The country was close enough to that, in any case. There were Protestant risings, quickly put down, but each succeeding one stressed the growing hatred of Mary's implacable government.

Whenever a rising took place, Elizabeth was summoned to court and questioned. Gardiner had been replaced by Cardinal Pole, a cold, passionless man who attacked her with greater skill than Gardiner, yet like Gardiner he too failed to draw from her any admission of disloyalty. In any case she had stood steadfastly aloof and, sure that public opinion was greatly in her favor, remained unafraid.

Meanwhile Philip's father, the Emperor Charles, had retired to a monastery. Philip's uncle was now Emperor of Germany,

while Philip himself was King of Spain and overlord of Burgundy and the Netherlands. That, in a sense, made Mary Queen of Spain, but with even less chance of being crowned there than Philip had of being crowned in England.

Philip returned at last to England after an absence of nineteen months, and Elizabeth was once again summoned to court. He spoke to her alone, for Mary, he said, had set herself stubbornly against receiving her. He seemed faintly ill at ease. He had returned to England, not with an army, merely his usual retinue, but even so, his progress through the streets of London had been watched in grim silence. He and Elizabeth had very little to say to each other at first, and their conversation was stilted and spasmodic.

There was an uneasy pause, broken at length by Philip.

"Mary will receive you on one condition."

"What condition?"

"She will also acknowledge you as heir on the same condition."

"Tell me what it is, for pity's sake!"

"You must first make public avowal of your adherence to the Catholic faith."

"Never!" she cried instantly.

"Not even to save yourself from the stake?"

"Mary would never dare!" And remembering something old Bishop Ridley had said while the flames had licked about him, she added passionately: "Let Mary burn me at the stake and my body will light a candle in England that will never be put out!"

Philip nodded approvingly. "A brave speech, Elizabeth, but as you say, Mary would never dare to light *that* candle." He looked at her reflectively; he was stroking his beard now in the old familiar way. "Let me give you some good advice. For England's sake, the England that will be yours without question if you take my advice, accept Mary's condition."

"Mary spoke once of her integrity," Elizabeth flashed back. "I have mine to think of, too."

"Foolish girl," Philip sighed. "Go back to Hatfield, and as things grow worse, give serious thought to my suggestion."

IV. Cecil

Chapter 21

"King Philip has gone back to Brussels," Sir William Cecil said, speaking quite casually.

Elizabeth inclined her head. "Everybody expected it, Sir William."

"Her Majesty the Queen," Cecil added, "has announced another royal pregnancy."

"Does anyone believe in it?"

"Your Grace, I doubt if even the queen herself believes it."

Looking at him steadily, Elizabeth asked herself the inevitable question: a friend or an enemy?

Sir William Cecil was thirty-seven, though younger than that in appearance, except for his eyes, which had an ageless look. He wore a black Italian cloak. The rest of his clothing was black also, the somber effect surprisingly relieved by a spotless white ruffle and neat white cuffs. She liked his candid expression and had felt strongly drawn to him on the few occasions that they had met. Through Thomas Parry he superintended the affairs of her household, though usually Parry went to London to confer with him. He was a man of undoubted ability, and she felt a sudden urge to have him speak up for himself.

"Tell me about your life," she said, "your family, your career."

Sir William met her steady gaze with twinkling eyes. "Your Grace wants the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"I do, Cecil, if any man has the courage to be so bold in the England of today. You come of yeoman stock, I believe."

He nodded. "My grandfather was a yeoman farmer. He fought at Bosworth Field. My father rose one step in the social scale and became a gentleman farmer. I went to two grammar schools and at fourteen to St. John's College. After that I began practicing law at Gray's Inn and later became a member of Parliament."

"What of your religious leanings?" Elizabeth asked carefully.

"They were fiercely Protestant to begin with, but so much blood has been shed in the name of religion recently that I have learned to regard religious enthusiasm with the utmost suspicion."

"As I have myself!" Elizabeth said warmly.

"As a Protestant," Cecil went on, "I supported Lord Protector Somerset until he went to extremes, yet because of my earlier support I was thrown into the Tower by Northumberland. He, however, soon released me, made me his secretary, and even granted me a knighthood."

"How deeply were you concerned in Northumberland's plot to upset the order of succession and place Jane Grey on the throne?" Elizabeth asked.

Sir William shrugged faintly. "As Your Grace knows, indeed as the whole world knows, I opposed Northumberland until my life was in danger. Then I acquiesced. The opposition won me a pardon from Queen Mary, but Her Majesty failed to give me, as I had hoped, a government office commensurate with my ability."

"Did that embitter you?"

"By no means. I know how to wait."

"For the death of Queen Mary and the accession of the new queen?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Whether she be Elizabeth Tudor or Mary Stuart?"

"That," he said mildly, "is a trap into which I refuse to fall."

Elizabeth was beginning to admire the man; he was a worthy sparring partner.

"You embraced the old faith," she pointed out, "before the queen pardoned you."

"I am as much attached to my head as the next man."

"Men have gone gladly to the stake, or to the block, for their faith."

"It occurred to me, Your Grace, that my head, and the brains it contained, would be well worth preserving."

"And no doubt you expect that the next queen will have use for your brains."

He smiled then. "I do indeed, and I think I can predict, without falling into any trap, that her name will be Elizabeth Tudor, providing she acts wisely—now."

"Wisely?"

"Before I say more, Your Grace, I think I should give you evidence of my trustworthiness."

"By all means, if you can!"

Sir William turned to the desk at which he had been sitting when Elizabeth had entered the room. He opened the household accounts and extracted three sheets of paper. These he gave to Elizabeth.

"Copies," he said, "of the letter you wrote some time ago to King Philip, His Majesty's reply, and the letter from Lord Robert Dudley."

A quick glance told Elizabeth that he spoke the truth. "How did you obtain them?"

"The copies were made from the original letters by your courier, who is, of course, no longer in your service. He sold them to a secret agent attached to the queen's council. A secret agent of my own secured them before they could reach the council."

"Why did you go to so much trouble on my behalf?"

"King Philip had charged me to watch over your interests."

"Which he thinks are his interests as well!"

"What harm in letting him *think*?"

"None at all!" Elizabeth laughed.

"Your Grace is now beginning to feel you can trust me?"

"Perhaps."

"Thank you," Sir William said gravely. "I shall speak now of

a conversation I had with King Philip before he left for Brussels. It concerned the problem of Your Grace's acknowledgment by the queen. His Majesty—"

"If he confided in you fully," Elizabeth interrupted quickly, "you must be well aware of my attitude to a change of religion."

Sir William inclined his head. "Yes, but my advice, if I may presume to give advice, is somewhat different from the king's. Under such circumstances, I myself see nothing against a *pretended* conversion."

"How could I pretend and remain honest with myself?"

"Does remaining honest with oneself really matter if, on the queen's death, England is saved from civil war? Her Majesty is tempted to name Mary Stuart her heir. She is determined to have a Catholic successor. If Mary Stuart comes to the throne, the Protestants will rise in greater numbers than ever before. I feel sure they would eventually succeed in placing you on the throne, but do you want so much unnecessary bloodshed?"

"The last thing I want is bloodshed," Elizabeth cried. "We have had too much of it already."

"Then why scruple at pretense, when the only thing that matters is a unified England, strong in itself, secure against foreign interference?"

Elizabeth looked at him eagerly. They thought alike in that.

"England for England, that is my aim," he added.

"My own words, my own aim!" Elizabeth cried.

Sir William glanced at the copy-letters she still held in her hand.

"Your Grace's twenty-fifth birthday is fast approaching," he remarked, referring obliquely to what Robin had written. "Need I also beg you to be strong in heart?"

Elizabeth made up her mind without further hesitation and wasted no time in writing to Mary. A reply came promptly. Mary was touched and pleased that her condition, which was not so much a condition as a request, had been accepted at last. She invited Elizabeth to come to court and promised to hold a banquet in celebration of the event.

When Elizabeth reached Whitehall, where the queen was at present in residence, she learned that Mary was ill again. Her

state was desperate, the physicians said, and hinted that the end was near.

"Your Grace may sit with Her Majesty for a few moments only," they warned.

Mary was lying in a darkened bedchamber and remained silent and immovable for some time before rousing herself to look at Elizabeth. She certainly had the appearance of death. When finally she spoke there was life only in her eyes.

"When I die," she said, "the word Calais will be written on my heart."

She was obviously delirious. Calais, once known as the brightest jewel of the English crown, had been lost to the French eight months ago, and Mary at that time had made the same remark. A ridiculous thing to say, Elizabeth thought, even though Calais had been an English possession since the days of Edward III. Calais, an almost useless piece of ground, had been costly to maintain as a foothold that had really been no foothold at all. England for England, to the devil with Calais!

"I thought you might want to talk about my acknowledgment," she ventured.

Mary forced herself up on her elbows. "Ah, yes!" Momentarily the old cunning was back in her eyes. "You think I may be dying, so naturally you want to hurry me. Well, I have no intention of dying. There is much yet to be done. Possibly I shall give the matter my attention when I can sit at my desk again, possibly not. More than likely I shall decide to make Mary Stuart my heir."

Elizabeth lingered at court for a few days until Mary, having refused to receive her again, ordered her back to Hatfield. By the end of the month it was reported that the queen was stronger but still unable to go about in public; it was also reported that in actual fact she was afraid to show herself to the people. During the following month, with Mary in bed one day, up the next, hope rose and fell. At last, early in November, when Elizabeth's twenty-fifth birthday had come and gone, a message from Philip reached Hatfield House. It was brought by none other than the most trusted of his personal representatives, the Count de Feria. The count fell to his knees when admitted to Elizabeth's presence and kissed her hand.

"Your Grace, soon to be Your Majesty," he murmured.

Elizabeth brushed this aside. "Mrs. Ashley said you brought word from King Philip."

The count rose. "Had I come straight to Hatfield the message would merely have run thus: the king's compliments to the Lady Elizabeth; he promises on his honor to do all he can."

"I take it you went first to court."

"As I was charged to do, Your Grace. I had speech with the queen, and the message now runs thus: Her Majesty, believing herself to be dying, has granted her dear husband the one most urgent wish of his life. Hence my words . . . soon to be Your Majesty."

"Heartening words," Elizabeth said, but caution bred of many disappointments held in check her rising excitement.

This was November tenth. The next day and the next, ministers of state, as well as the heads of many noble families, Protestant and Catholic alike, came out to Hatfield to pay their respects. This seemed a sure sign, but cautious still, Elizabeth received them with scant enthusiasm.

On the fourteenth, Mary sent Elizabeth a personal message, and the messenger, one of Mary's ladies, brought in addition the crown jewels together with a small, richly framed portrait of Philip. Elizabeth gazed long at the portrait. It seemed to indicate two things: Philip himself was responsible for the sending of the jewels and was at the same time reminding her of his intention to make her his next wife.

"Give me the queen's message," she said.

"Your Grace is urged to take under your protection Her Majesty's servants, to pay in full Her Majesty's debts, and to maintain before God the religion which Her Majesty has been at pains to re-establish."

Elizabeth dwelt for a time on Mary's message. By "servants" she meant her ministers of state. When the time came, their ability would be carefully assessed, and some, perhaps, would be retained. As for the religious question, she would wait with patience, test public opinion, and follow, if possible, a middle course.

"I acknowledge one obligation," she said at length, "the squaring of the queen's debts."

Chapter 22

Elizabeth rose at dawn on the morning of November seventeenth and, without summoning her ladies, dressed quickly. It seemed almost as if she were obeying an urgent order to be ready without delay for the news which, since the crown jewels had been placed in her keeping, had been expected hourly at Hatfield House. From the deep stillness she sensed that snow had fallen during the night and, going to the window, she gazed out on a world strangely at peace. Finding a heavenly tranquillity in the snow-covered countryside, she remained at the window, watching the rising sun tip the snow-weighted treetops with golden light.

Presently she saw the first horseman enter the park, then the next and the next. In the deep snow there was no sound whatever. Hoofprints alone gave the lie to the feeling that these horsemen might well be ghosts. The first, as he drew closer, she recognized as Count de Feria, the second as William Cecil. She glanced beyond them; the park was filling rapidly with a whole army of horsemen. How many genuine friends, she asked herself, how many timeservers? How many turncoats eager to seek her out, now that the turncoat season was upon the land?

She moved from the window at last but, with a strange lethargy upon her, felt no pressing need to hurry below. Let them wait, she thought, and waiting grow anxious. She went down at last with Mrs. Ashley and Thomas Parry a pace or two behind her, and farther back her ladies, whispering excitedly, one declaring that they should all be in deep mourning, another that gay colors and laughter would be more to the point.

Elizabeth turned for a moment and faced Thomas Parry and Mrs. Ashley. They were faithful servants, already growing old in her service. They deserved a just reward.

"You, Thomas Parry, shall be comptroller of my new household," she decided. "And you, dear Ashley, since I no longer need a governess, shall be mistress of the robes."

But what of Robin Dudley, a voice seemed to whisper. He had been much in her mind of late. Robin and his reading of the stars! What a joke to create a new office for him, that of royal astrologer!

She found the great hall of Hatfield House crammed with gentlemen, row upon row of them lined up behind Count de Feria and William Cecil. Upon sight of her they tore their caps from their heads and fell to their knees. Cecil started to speak, but De Feria's voice drowned his with a rush of words, breaking the news that was now no news at all.

"The queen is dead, long live the queen!"

Mary's former privy councilors pushed forward, a ridiculous sight, Elizabeth thought, scrabbling there on their knees, and falteringly echoed De Feria's words.

"It is God's doing," she said, with a becoming piety.

"Your Majesty has saved us all," Cecil said, and his words had a sure ring of sincerity.

"How?" Elizabeth asked.

"By remaining alive," he said simply.

"Well," she told him, "life is precious to us all, but not so precious as the welfare of England."

And by England, she thought, I don't mean a band of anxious turncoats.

"God save Your Majesty!" the gathering cried.

"Cecil," she said, "a word with you in private."

She withdrew with him to her study, conscious of the questioning eyes which followed her, eyes of men who sought the meaning of this first action of the new queen.

"Affairs of state first," she said briskly. "I propose to make you my secretary of state. Does that please you, William Cecil?"

"Only, madam, if you feel you can trust me sufficiently."

"A fresh clean wind is blowing through England," she said. "And in these changed circumstances, I have a notion you can trust yourself. That is enough to begin with."

Cecil took a folded letter from an inner pocket and laid it

on the desk. Opening it, Elizabeth saw at once that this was the letter she had written to Mary concerning the late queen's religious condition.

"I feel sure Your Majesty would like to see it destroyed," he said.

She tore the paper up herself, then flung the pieces in the brazier.

"You employ excellent spies," she commented. "No doubt we shall have further work for them, but not too much, I hope." She turned from the brazier. "Now for something more personal. Send a courier at once to Brussels—"

"If I may make so bold," Cecil interposed, "it would be best to address all communications to King Philip through Count de Feria, who is now the Spanish ambassador."

Elizabeth laughed heartily. And how good it was, she thought, to be able to laugh like this, spontaneously, without fear or reservation.

"My dear Cecil," she said, "you will often try to read my mind, and often you will fail, as now. The courier goes to Lord Robert Dudley."

"Ah yes, Your Majesty said a personal matter."

"Not so personal as you might think!" Elizabeth retorted sharply. "I merely want to reward him for past services by giving him a position at court. Have you any suggestions?"

"Lord Robert is a gallant soldier. I can think of nothing more fitting than master of the horse."

Pondering this, Elizabeth almost laughed aloud. As master of the horse, Robin would be constantly at her beck and call. It would even be necessary, or at all events convenient, for him to have apartments close to her own.

"Master of the horse it is, then," she said solemnly.

With Cecil gone to do her bidding, Count de Feria requested an audience. She kept him waiting for a while, then admitted him graciously to her presence. He fell to his knees once again, but his manner seemed more cocksure now than humble. Deliberately she kept him there overlong before giving him permission to rise.

"The king will return to London whenever Your Majesty wishes it," he said.

Clearly this was another way of saying that Philip was ready now to offer her marriage, yet plain speaking, with Mary dead but a few hours, was scarcely possible in *that* direction. Nevertheless, she felt a need to speak as plainly as possible herself and did so at once, with a new delight surging in her breast.

"The wishes of my people come before my own," she said grandly. "Would you, knowing the temper of many of those same people, agree that there is room in London for myself and a foreign king?"

De Feria colored instantly. "Your Majesty—!"

"King Philip of Spain," she added softly, "but no longer, with or without a crown, King Philip of England. A sort of dowager king, if you like, and with no dower house at his disposal in this country."

De Feria, who possessed little of Philip's famous patience and none of his evenness of temper, struggled hard to repress an angry retort. Elizabeth watched the struggle with interest. In the future many men would stand before her like this, cursing her inwardly yet striving to preserve a diplomatic suavity. Life, she thought merrily, had many joys in store for her.

"Have you anything to add before withdrawing?" she asked.

De Feria bowed. "Your Majesty, I feel confident, would never unwittingly make an enemy of Spain."

A threat, and at this early stage! It was intolerable!

"I would sooner risk making an enemy of any country than an enemy of my own," she said earnestly.

She watched him contemptuously as he bowed himself from the room. She wanted peace with Spain, peace with the whole world, but not through marriage with any man, still less with Philip.

"England for England," she whispered. "Elizabeth Tudor for England. England for Elizabeth Tudor."

Three vows, she thought, each of which had the same meaning.

And yet, as a woman, surely there would be room in her life for love? She was her own mistress now. Freedom was suddenly and intoxicatingly hers. Freedom meant life, but life without love was no life at all. The triple vow was the vow of the

queen, not the woman. England for the queen, and for the woman . . . ?

Robin, she thought excitedly, dear, sweet Robin!

Chapter 23

"Bess!"

"Robin!"

Elizabeth, a high-collared cloak wrapped close about her night attire, stepped forward into the coldness of the November night. She knew she was playing a childish game, but with all her heart she had wanted it like this, a repetition of their last meeting in this same walled-in garden of the Tower.

"How like me to start off on the wrong foot!" she heard Robin say.

With her eyes growing accustomed to the darkness she saw that he was on his knees a few paces in front of her.

"The wrong foot?" she questioned.

"I should have greeted the queen with due respect. It should have been 'Your Majesty,' not 'Bess.' "

"It's Bess and Robin now, and always will be, except in the presence of others, mind you!"

"Yet all the way from Hatfield to the Tower the queen's master of the horse was always on hand, but never a glance did Her Majesty spare him. Nor did she deign to receive him on his arrival at Hatfield, in spite of the honor she had shown in summoning him to her side."

"I had a fancy not to notice you till now," she said softly. "Get up from your knees, you great idiot, and tell me my play-acting is as pleasing to you as it is to me."

Robin sprang to his feet. In the darkness she could still see little of him. The dim outline of his face, the pointed beard, the uncovered head. A bulkier figure now; his shoulders would of course have broadened.

"To take up where we left off . . ." he murmured.

"And why not?" Elizabeth challenged. "The shadow of death no longer hovers over us; watchful guards no longer stand between us."

"The crown—does *that* count for nothing?"

She shivered involuntarily. The crown . . . she'd wanted it always, suffered persecution because of it, imprisonment, much agony of mind. It was hers now, but here was Robin trying to force her to see that it set her apart.

"Come," she said angrily and led him from the garden. "I'll have no talk of being set apart. Idiot talk it is, between old friends. I'll have no more of it."

Elizabeth had been queen for a full week and today had ridden in state from Hatfield to London. First there had been the proclamation in Westminster Hall, then again, with much pageantry, at the gates of Hatfield House. After that she had held her first council meeting at which, while swearing-in new members of her own choosing, she had prudently retained many of Mary's old councilors. A cautious clemency had been essential, just as it had been essential to issue the stern order: "Gentlemen, an end to religious persecution; no more torture, no more hangings, no more burnings."

"Surely these are not the queen's apartments," Robin remarked.

They were standing now in the antechamber of the cramped apartments which Elizabeth had occupied as a prisoner in the Tower. A brazier glowed warmly in a corner, a few candles burned fitfully in the draft from the open door.

"The play acting still," Robin chided gently.

"The play acting still! The queen lies abed in the royal apartments, but the woman has escaped to the past."

"But this is the present, Bess."

Somehow the part she had chosen for herself this night now seemed dismayingly false. She tried to ignore the thought, slammed the door and snatched up a candle.

"Let me look at you, Robin!"

"Well, are you satisfied?" Robin asked at length.

"You're a man now, that's all that matters."

He chuckled warmly. "In the fuller sense, my manhood has yet to be proved."

He swept her into his arms, knocking the candle from her hand. Well, she thought, raising her lips to his, he needed no prompting after all. Freeing herself at last, she stamped out the fallen candle, which was still burning on the floor. Robin himself moved about the room, putting out the others till only one remained alight. This he took up and bowed her into the bed-chamber.

"Sufficient to guide us," he said.

Elizabeth drew back the heavy bed curtains, then turned to look at him. His eyes met hers, quite merrily.

"The removal of all restraint has gone to your head, Bess. Your ladies must be brimming over with curiosity, even though the queen can do no wrong."

These were lines that had not been written for him. Indeed, for what was now to come, no lines had been intended. She found herself blushing. "It is understood," she said woodenly, "that as a free woman I have a fancy to spend a little time in my former Tower cell. And I take it," she added, still more woodenly, "that you came here unobserved, as instructed."

"Unobserved and, unlike you, fully dressed," he laughed.

Turning from him quickly, she drew her cloak more closely about her, but he came up behind her and began to remove it with the utmost gentleness.

"It was a grand speech you made on entering the Tower," he said and repeated her words with admiration: "'Some have fallen from being princes of this land to being prisoners of this place; I am raised from being a prisoner in this place to be prince of this land.' Were they your own words, or Cecil's, as some people suggest?"

"My own, of course! My speeches will always be my own."

"Nevertheless," Robin said lightly, "we have in Cecil a worthy secretary of state to a still more worthy queen."

She sensed then that he was jealous of the favor she had bestowed upon William Cecil. Was Robin already dreaming that after this night he would be able to gain his way in all things?

"The blush has faded," he said. "What a pity! A queenly blush is the only thing that could make you lovelier."

"After tonight," she said quickly, "when I am no longer an old maid, I'll never blush again."

Robin turned to the candle, which he had placed on a table.

"Is it the queen's wish or the woman's," he asked, "that in putting out this tiny flame a greater one should be kindled?"

"The greater one was kindled years ago. I know that now."

It was the right response, but did she really mean it? Robin had served her well in the past, had proved himself sincere, utterly trustworthy, but was she truly in love with him? The sight of him excited her now, set her pulses racing, but was it love, or the promise of realizing a long-delayed desire? She had refused to look deep into herself for the true reason. Of course she had! She had told herself that to take a man would be a gesture made in the name of freedom, that to let a pent-up natural craving burst forth would bring release and an even greater freedom than Mary's death had brought.

"The queen's wish or the woman's?" Robin insisted.

"The woman's wish, the queen's command!"

"The queen can do no wrong," he laughed, and extinguished the candle flame.

When at last she lay in his arms, she begged him to be patient and gentle. She resembled her father; she joked falteringly, in this as well as other things, but unlike Harry of England, she had waited overlong. Soon she began to find confidence in the low murmur of Robin's voice as he dwelt lightly on the past, saying that it had been love play, not really anger, when she had attacked him in the park at Hatfield and they'd rolled together on the grass.

"It won't be long before you know the truth," she whispered.

"The truth?" He sounded at a loss.

"Have you forgotten what you said that day?"

He laughed softly then. "'I'm not, are you?' Yes, I remember!"

She turned her face from Robin's, but he, unaware of the tenseness that had gripped her, leaned over her and placed his warm lips at the base of her throat. Other and bitter memories of the past were crowding into her mind.

"Dear, sweet Bess," Robin murmured.

Elizabeth lay rigid in his arms, the tenseness increasing. The firmness of his chest, a delight a moment ago, revolted her now. He had become of a sudden the formless bogey of the early

nightmares, pressing down upon her in the darkness. One moment she thought he was Seymour; another, her father. Frantically she told herself that she had always loved her father, never feared him, yet the memory of the vast bulk, the flushed face, the gross stomach, tormented her. And then she could hear Seymour saying, "He chopped off your mother's head." She pushed her hands against Robin's chest, fighting off the memory.

"Bess, what is it?"

"Nothing," she gasped.

She tried to relax in his arms. She knew she wanted him desperately. Her body was racked with the pain of her need, but her memories, now a horrible pageant, had control of her mind. A moan escaped her lips.

Robin released her instantly. "Bess!"

"Leave me, for pity's sake, leave me," she sobbed.

"But Bess, I scarcely touched you."

"Please go, Robin," she begged.

"I adore you, Bess. I would rather kill myself than hurt you in any way."

"Then leave me now."

"Is that an order, a royal command?"

"Yes, Robin, a royal command."

"But what of the woman?"

"The woman commands it too."

"A double command. I see I have no choice!"

Elizabeth lay back in the bed, tense still, but the pain receding, and listened mutely as Robin moved about the room. She was glad of the darkness, for she knew that shame and humiliation would be written on her face. She was even afraid that it might have been evident in her voice, and wondered what to offer in the way of explanation. Explanation! She stirred herself. Let her remember who she was! She owed no explanation, nor ever would, under any circumstances, to anyone.

"I seem to have lost a shoe," she heard him grumble in the darkness.

"Oh, hurry, Robin, hurry!"

"But Bess, if I were seen hobbling forth on one shoe, think of the scandal! Ah, here it is! How fortunate that I've had much experience of dressing in the dark."

A wave of jealousy struck her then. It was unreasonable, but she clung to it, savored it, and soon lost almost all the tenderness. After a moment she felt his weight on the edge of the bed.

"Bess, I swear I caused you no physical pain."

"It was the mental agony, Robin." Yes, she knew now what to tell him! "I remembered your wife."

"An odd moment to think of her," he said mildly. "How can you be your father's daughter and think of such a thing at such a time?"

"My scruples, it seems, are greater than his ever were."

"A worthy thought, Your Majesty."

"And you, Robin, must help me. If ever I show weakness again, remind me of my duty."

"So that you shall go in virgin purity to some future marriage bed?"

"Yes," she said shortly.

Robin rose from the bed. "Dear Bess, I wish him well, your future husband, whoever he may be."

Chapter 24

"His Excellency the Spanish ambassador is waiting, madam," William Cecil reminded Elizabeth.

"Let him wait! Let him cultivate a little of the vast patience shown by his master King Philip."

Elizabeth was working at her desk at Somerset House, to which residence she had come after thirteen days at the Tower. Originally she had intended to remain at the Tower until the coronation, but after that first disastrous night, the grim fortress had become more distasteful to her than ever before. Daily since her arrival here she had held lengthy council meetings, and today, Christmas Eve, she had been at her desk from early morning, with William Cecil constantly in attendance. There was much work to be done, for which she was thankful, for in work she was still able to lose herself.

"Well, what next, Cecil?"

Her secretary of state placed a sheet of paper before her.

"This, Your Majesty, is a copy of a letter sent to the Spanish ambassador by King Philip himself."

"Ah, your spies are working cleverly, as usual!"

"Not in this case, madam. De Feria made the copy himself and lost it on purpose, knowing that it would be found and brought to your notice."

"A somewhat heavy-handed diplomacy!"

Cecil shook his head. "King Philip penned certain phrases which would make De Feria afraid to face you until your anger abated."

Elizabeth read the letter with her usual haste, seizing upon a word here, a phrase there. Philip was prepared to sacrifice himself by formally asking for her hand in marriage. Sacrifice himself indeed! He was also prepared to take the risk of such a union bringing about a full-scale conflict between France and Spain. And even though she was a heretic, that drawback could be overcome, without upsetting her Protestant subjects, if she received secret absolution from the Pope.

"I feel more inclined to laughter than anger," Elizabeth said dryly. "I can just picture Philip stroking his beard and ruminating. But why is he so eager for marriage?"

"He prefers it to war."

"And the last thing *I* want is war with Spain. What do you advise, Cecil?"

"My policy strives for peace, madam. A nation, even a victorious one, gains more from one year's peace than ten years' war. Let us then work to make a good peace with France—we were dragged into that war by King Philip—yet at the same time preserve peace with Spain."

"You want me to sacrifice myself on the altar of marriage?"

Cecil smiled candidly. "That won't be necessary. King Philip knows the temper of the English. He could easily lose control of the Netherlands while we stubbornly opposed any army he might land in England. The risk would be too great. He must keep the Netherlands at any cost."

"Admit De Feria at once," Elizabeth decided. "Nothing will delight me more than to refuse the mighty King of Spain."

"Not an outright refusal, madam," Cecil begged. "The situa-

tion is too ticklish for that. If I may suggest it, keep King Philip—dangling.”

Count de Feria’s manner suggested a mixture of his earlier cocksureness and a fear that Elizabeth might fly into a rage, but her smile and her deliberately soft words of welcome quickly put him at his ease.

“Your Majesty has never looked more charming,” he said gallantly. “How gratifying to King Philip that the Queen of England should be dressed *à l’espagnole*.”

Elizabeth was wearing a dark purple surcoat of Spanish origin. Lined with ermine, it partly covered a simple but expensive gown of gold satin.

“Fashion has little to do with nationality,” she told him sweetly. “No doubt, within a week or so, I shall begin to feel quite dowdy, dressed *à l’espagnole*, and turn to France for inspiration.”

“Heaven forbid!” he cried.

Since he was still very much at ease, she decided, after a few moments of inconsequential chatter, to undermine his confidence by drawing his attention to his general unpopularity in London.

“It grieves me deeply,” she murmured, “that the Queen of England should be forced, like the porters in the streets of London, to view King Philip’s ambassador with suspicion.”

“Your Majesty,” De Feria said blandly, “I learned long ago that suspicion in this country is little more than English reserve.”

“King Philip, on the other hand, learned exactly the opposite.”

“Then no one could blame His Majesty for an inclination to place personal feeling before the demands of state.”

“If we all did that, the state as an institution would cease to exist.”

De Feria bowed deeply. “A possibility fully appreciated by my master, who is fully aware of his duty. The human inclination has been set aside, and—”

“In a word, King Philip is prepared to *sacrifice* himself.”

“In a word, yes,” De Feria admitted, momentarily ill at ease.

“But sacrifice himself to what end?” she asked innocently.

"Marriage, Your Majesty, with a Protestant queen."

"In short, a heretic."

De Feria frowned. "Even so, a compromise is surely possible."

But for the moment Elizabeth had ceased to listen. Would it be the same with Philip, she was wondering, as it had been that night with Robin? Having no love at all for Philip, surely it would be even worse! It was strange, she reflected somberly, that instead of hating Robin because of what had happened, she now adored him more than ever.

"A compromise," De Feria repeated. "A secret papal absolution is not beyond the bounds of possibility."

Elizabeth saw an objection to this: "By accepting a papal absolution, the queen you have in mind would be admitting of her own free will an illegitimate status which in the eyes of Rome denies her any right to the throne."

"Ah, but a *secret* absolution . . ."

"Such a secret could not be kept for long."

"Would that matter, Your Majesty? The queen we have in mind is the monarch in possession. In addition, the greater proportion of her subjects, the Catholic section, fears France far more than Spain."

Elizabeth began to feel that she was losing control of the situation; she would soon be obliged to say either yes or no.

"King Philip's proposal is in very bad taste, coming so soon after his wife's death."

"In the eyes of the people at large, yes; but in our own eyes, the matter being of the utmost urgency, no. An agreement could be kept secret for some little time, but an agreement is imperative *now*."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I must have time to think, to weigh the pros and cons as carefully and prudently as King Philip would in my place. The contemplated step is too serious a one for haste."

"His Majesty has already weighed the pros and cons and reached a decision."

"In that case—!" she began angrily.

"Wait, Your Majesty!" De Feria interposed. "I am instructed to accept no answer whatever unless it be 'yes.'"

Elizabeth was furious, furious with Philip, with De Feria,

but even more so with herself. She had indeed lost control of the situation. Reluctant as she might be to reach a decision, she had allowed herself to be robbed, now or in the future, of uttering an outright "no."

"Unofficial statements being of no account whatever," De Feria suggested, "Your Majesty may of course speak *unofficially*."

She seized on this gleefully.

"Splendid! Unofficially, my answer is 'no'!"

Nevertheless, face to face with William Cecil a few moments later, she felt like a naughty child and admitted, after giving him an account of the interview, that she had failed both herself and him.

"No very great harm has been done," Cecil assured her, "though in future marriage negotiations with other countries—and many can be anticipated—I beg of you to practise a greater circumspection."

Future marriage negotiations! The very thought made Elizabeth feel sick in the stomach.

"Strong as Spain is," Cecil went on, "I doubt if the Pope would really grant the absolution promised by King Philip. In point of fact a communication has just reached me from Rome. The Pope suggests that Your Majesty's hereditary right to the English throne is in grave doubt."

"We know that already. What else does he say?"

"The Pope understands that the Queen of Scotland has a prior claim, but at the same time he is willing, if Your Majesty will submit the controversy to him, to show you as much indulgence as justice permits."

"Controversy! I admit no controversy!"

"Nor do your ministers, madam. Nevertheless, the religious question is still a troublesome one at home. The coronation is to take place in the middle of January, yet up to now I have been unable to find any bishop willing to anoint you."

This was insufferable, insufferable!

"The time has come for me to make a gesture," she said angrily. "My tolerance is wearing very thin indeed. Up to now, out of respect for the late queen, Mass has been heard daily in

the royal chapel, but tomorrow I'll make it clear to all that the state religion of England was prescribed by my father."

"May I ask how?" Cecil asked politely.

"I'll go to Mass myself, but not hear it. I shall, my dear Cecil, withdraw with dignity."

The minister looked troubled for a moment. Of Elizabeth's five million subjects half or more were Catholic. Yet in the end he agreed that since religious persecution had been forbidden, her gesture might be a safe and harmless test. He then mentioned the Pope's reference to her having been born out of wedlock and urged her to take action similar to that taken by the late queen.

"Have myself declared legitimate by act of Parliament?" Elizabeth asked dryly.

"If the subject is a painful one, madam—"

"Rubbish, but I vowed long ago that there would never be an act of Parliament to make me other than what I am, Harry of England's daughter."

"Madam," Cecil said severely, "a new act of Parliament is absolutely necessary, an act securing your position if not your legitimacy."

"Very well, then, have it worded something like this: that I am rightfully, lineally and lawfully descended from the blood royal, whether or not on the wrong side of the blanket."

"Should the last phrase be included?" Cecil smiled.

She laughed, "No, a sense of humor must never appear evident in the fusty old statute book."

Cecil smiled his agreement.

"If I may make so bold," he said, after a moment's silence, "I should like to discuss a subject which concerns Your Majesty's private life. It would be wise, as a means of suppressing unpleasant rumors, to summon Lady Robert Dudley to court."

Elizabeth looked at him quickly. "Unpleasant rumors?" she challenged.

"Unfounded, I feel sure, but still unpleasant. It is unfortunate for a new queen to be harassed by scandal."

"I've been harassed by worse things than scandal. I'll weather the storm, if storm it is!"

"But madam—"

"Oh, hold your tongue, Cecil!" she cried, in a sudden rage. "My private life is precisely that, *private*. You may advise and interfere to your heart's content in state affairs, but my private life is my own business. Remember that, William Cecil!"

However, the subject, coming between her and more urgent matters for the rest of the day, rankled so much that she sent a message to Robin commanding him to take supper with her that night. Defiantly she sent the message by a page, word of mouth, and defiantly she stressed that supper would be tête-à-tête. That, she thought gleefully, would add fuel to the yet small fire of scandal.

And she came to the point the moment Robin was alone with her. "I hear that scandalmongers are linking our names. Is this true?"

Robin shrugged easily. "Certain Catholic peers and other gentlemen of extreme Puritan leanings are gossiping. They hope to discredit you in the eyes of the whole country."

Looking at him as he sat opposite her at the supper table, his handsome features more attractive than ever in the candlelight, Elizabeth began to feel that the impasse reached that night at the Tower had no reality whatever. She had been in too much of a hurry. The falseness she had felt should have told her this at the time. She adored Robin more than any man she had ever known; she ached with love for him.

"Cecil wants me to bring your wife to court," she said, steady-ing herself quickly.

"Amy would obey a royal command," Robin said lightly, "but would come most reluctantly."

"Reluctantly? Why?"

Robin shrugged and remained silent.

"Tell me about Amy," Elizabeth pressed. "Are you in love with her, Robin?"

"Dear Bess, I've loved only one woman all my life."

The flattery was delicious. "Poor Amy," Elizabeth said softly.

"It was a marriage of convenience," Robin reminded her, "arranged by my father, who coveted the Robsart money. Amy and I soon found we had little liking for each other. While I was abroad in the army she isolated herself in the country. I haven't

even seen her since my return. When we do meet, we shall meet as strangers."

"Poor Robin! A disastrous marriage, and now a disastrous love affair."

He gave her a quick, puzzled look.

She laughed coquettishly. "One could hardly call me a satisfactory bedfellow," she whispered.

Robin remained quite silent. She found his politeness most appealing.

"Are your apartments comfortable, my lord?" she asked, quickly making plans.

"Why yes, they—"

"Nonsense! You find them small, inconvenient and damp. Dampness in winter is intolerable. You might easily take cold. Your eyes would run, your nose would grow red, your good looks would desert you. Moreover, I abhor colds myself and would hate to catch one from you. The queen, therefore, commands a change of apartments for her master of the horse. After all, she may well need a horse—or a man—in the dead of night. The apartments next to mine are vacant. Move into them."

"Immediately?"

"Immediately!"

Robin rose from the table, a smile of complete understanding on his face.

"Wait, my lord!"

"Your Majesty?"

"The queen expects a report on your new apartments. She expects it tonight. It is, of course, a state secret. It shall be communicated—secretly."

Robin bowed. "I take it that the door which connects the two apartments—"

"The two bedchambers, to be precise!"

"—will be unbarred," he concluded.

"You understand the queen's wishes perfectly."

"Perfectly."

"God's precious soul," she burst out, "why am I so brisk and businesslike? The queen's *wishes*? I mean her desires, Robin, her most pressing, urgent desires!"

Robin bowed again. "But in moments of weakness like this, I was to remind the queen of her duty."

"I refuse to listen!"

Elizabeth retired to her dressing chamber immediately, grew impatient with her ladies, berated them for their slowness and finally dismissed them in such harsh tones that they hurried away in fright.

She went quickly to the bedchamber, drew aside the arras, unbarred the communicating door and flung herself on the bed, there to wait with impatience for Robin to make his appearance. Having anticipated a return of the disturbing memories, she tried at once to make her mind a complete blank, then fearing that the voices of the past might have greater freedom in which to attack her, she forced herself to dwell upon them. The result was gratifying. She felt nothing, not even the faintest revulsion. The next step was to call up and boldly face the suffocating nightmare bogey. She imagined her father in his most disgusting guise. The mental picture left her undisturbed. She said: "You chopped off my mother's head," and after a moment imagined him retorting: "Well, what of it? You would have done the same in my place."

Now for that wretch Seymour, she thought, and called him to mind with such intensity that she could almost see him standing by the bed, his hand resting on the curtains. "I never loved you," she said, "nor did you die for me." But suddenly her mind was in utter confusion, and voices, hers and Seymour's, seemed to fill the room.

"When I died, Bess, a part of me became a part of your inmost self."

"That is a lie, Seymour!"

"How can it be, when you believe it, Bess?"

She struggled desperately to cast his image from her mind and succeeded at last in replacing it with Robin's. The ghost of Seymour, brought up from the dark depths of memory, might haunt her still, but what was a ghost compared with a living man? Oh hurry, Robin, hurry! She imagined Robin's eyes, the touch of his lips, the caress of his hands. She ran her own hands down her body from breast to thigh. Her flesh was burning feverishly, and in an instant the excruciating pain, so vivid a memory,

was stabbing at her chest, clawing downward, twisting her limbs. She sprang from the bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The reflected face was so haggard she scarcely recognized it as her own. In anger and despair she snatched up the candles which stood on either side of the mirror, flung them to the floor and stamped them out. Even to *think* of it was sufficient now.

"Why this curse?" she sobbed. "*Why?*"

She heard a step beyond the communicating door and, running to it, flung the bar home with a crash. A moment later she felt the latch lift beneath her hand.

"Robin?"

"Who else, dear Bess?"

"Duty is paramount, after all," she said dully, and turned from the door.

Chapter 25

William Cecil, glancing nervously about, caught Elizabeth's eye as she entered the royal chapel followed by a large gathering of attendants. She held his gaze for a moment, inclined her head so slightly that none but he observed the gesture, and seated herself. The Bishop of Carlisle was already at the altar. She looked at him grimly.

Cecil had said that he was the one bishop likely, if hard pressed, to officiate at the coronation, but after she had made her personal attitude clear this morning, she suspected that he would become as adamant as the rest.

On this thought she began to waver but quickly grew angry with herself and, at the conclusion of the gospel, rose abruptly to her feet. With thoughts of the curse still clouding her mind, she sensed then that her movements were stiff and unreal, as if she were a puppet on strings controlled by a hidden puppet master. All eyes were upon her now, and instead of making the expected royal offering—she was ready to swear she could feel the tug of the strings—she turned and walked slowly from the chapel.

"Well," she demanded of William Cecil when he joined her later, "have I created a sensation?"

"Indeed you have, madam."

"If you think I went too far, let it be known that I suffered a sudden indisposition."

"If I did that, Your Majesty would be expected to go to Mass again."

"Enough of this wavering!" she cried angrily.

"If you are indeed ill, madam—"

"Ill? Do I *look* ill?"

"Indeed you don't, madam. A little strained, perhaps, but after day upon day of hard work, that is understandable."

Elizabeth dwelt bleakly on the real reason. Hard work was nothing compared with the toll taken by the sleepless hours of last night.

"Keep me informed of the people's attitude," she said briefly.

During the next two days it became clear that the royal gesture had caused more approval than disapproval. So then she took the next step and ordered that the litany, the epistle and the gospel should henceforth be read in English, not only in the royal chapel but in all the churches throughout the kingdom. "English is the language of the English people," she said, thus furthering the nationalistic spirit which she felt a pressing need to stimulate. Following this, Cecil was able to report that the Bishop of Carlisle had at last agreed to officiate at the coronation.

"Amazing," Elizabeth said dryly. "How did you bring this about?"

"The good bishop holds a coveted position in the royal household, as I pointed out to him. He naturally wants to keep it, so he accepted the fact that he owes full obedience to the Queen's Majesty."

As a prelude to the coronation Elizabeth embarked on the traditional Procession of Recognition. She went in state to the Tower and from there, riding in a magnificent chariot over which four knights in coat-armor supported a crimson canopy, she entered the City. She was preceded by a band of heralds and trumpeters and followed by a long train of ladies and gentlemen, all decked out in crimson velvet and all on horseback. It was the bravest of brave showings, a pageant such as had not been seen

in London since her father's day. Her reception was tumultuous, yet her heart was heavy within her, and she felt again as if she were a puppet on strings.

Indeed, at times it seemed to her that she was standing aside from herself, watching the puppet master at work. A little tug here, and she was lifting a hand to greet the more distant sight-seers; another tug there, and she was returning the greetings of those who pressed so close about the chariot that its progress was constantly hindered. "God save Your Majesty," she heard on every hand, and "God save you all," she heard herself reply.

The coronation took place the next day. Robin Dudley, with his interest in astrology, had consulted a certain Dr. Dee, and the learned doctor had pronounced this date—January 15, 1559—a lucky day for so important a ceremony. And Elizabeth, indulging Robin in his fanciful superstition, had solemnly accepted it. The ceremony itself, hedged in as it was by ancient customs, deprived her of any close contact with her people, and this made the feeling that she was standing aside from herself more pronounced than ever. The invisible strings were still being pulled, but with the utmost skill and timing, she decided, and the puppet's robes, which were of cloth of gold, the long train lined with ermine, were a truly magnificent sight. When the long ceremony drew to a close she heard an amazing sound. The puppet had giggled. Worse, it had followed the giggle with the words, "How it stinks, the anointing oil!" a remark far too frivolous for so solemn an occasion. Nevertheless, it did seem to indicate that the puppet had ceased to be a puppet, that Elizabeth Tudor, crowned and acclaimed, was almost herself again.

She touched the crown, the weight of which she had no recollection of having felt before, and placed a hand on the sword which had been girded about her waist. The scepter was in her other hand, and there was a strange feeling about one of her fingers. She glanced down quickly. Ah yes, the coronation ring! She had taken a husband at last; England now was truly hers.

Another important ceremony soon followed the coronation, that of the opening of Elizabeth's first Parliament. For with the crown deep in debt and the country all but bankrupt, the queen was desperately in need of supply. The opening ceremony was preceded by a religious service in Westminster Abbey. Elizabeth

attended it, wearing the customary parliamentary robes, and listened attentively to the sermon preached by Dr. Cox, the tutor of her half brother Edward. Dr. Cox who had been recalled from exile in Geneva. Again, at an inappropriate time, she giggled. For here she was, listening to a stern supporter of Calvin presiding over a congregation which included all the Catholic bishops. Noting how restive they were, she glanced with interest at their faces and saw, or thought she saw, a look on each which resembled the look on Bishop Gardiner's face when, angry and frustrated, he had failed to make her confess her "fault."

When Parliament had been opened, the bishops retaliated by refusing to take the oath of the queen's supremacy. Elizabeth laughed shortly—there was no inclination this time to giggle like a child—and issued an order depriving them of their sees. Her action met with widespread approval. The bishops had none but themselves to blame, and she could even thank them for assisting in the task of changing the state religion.

Shortly before the dissolution of this first Parliament, the speaker of the House of Commons begged permission to present a petition of vital importance to the country.

"In short," William Cecil said, "the speaker, the knights and the burgesses of the Commons respectfully urge Your Gracious Majesty to marry."

"I see nothing in that of vital importance," Elizabeth said harshly.

"Madam, the importance lies in this: Parliament has conceived so deep a love and respect for Your Majesty that its members, looking to the future, long for the assurance that an heir of your body will some day reign in England."

Elizabeth acted without a moment's hesitation. She seized the heavy inkwell from the desk at which she was sitting and, with all her strength, hurled it across the room. She was instantly appalled at what she had done. It seemed to her an open admission of the thought that had been troubling her since Christmas Eve, the growing belief that, incapable of taking a man, she would never have children.

"I find it insufferable," she said quickly, "that I should be discussed in Parliament like a prize brood mare."

Cecil picked up the inkwell, then looked fastidiously at his stained fingers.

"Am I to tell Parliament this, in so many words?" he asked mildly.

Elizabeth laughed shortly. "Summon them to my presence. I'll think of softer, more appropriate words."

"If Your Majesty would like me to prepare a fitting reply—"

"By God no! I'll write my own speeches."

And so she donned her parliamentary robes, in which she looked her best, her most commanding, and received the speaker, the knights and the burgesses in the Great Gallery of Whitehall Palace. Having prepared no set speech, she listened in silence as the petition was read to her. As the speaker concluded, she found that she was fingering her coronation ring, a habit that was becoming most constant.

Ah! she thought.

"I take your earnest recommendation in good part," she began, with studied haughtiness, "even though I would, with like earnestness, remind you that *your* duty is to obey, *mine* to command."

She paused, letting the words sink in. After that she slowly removed the coronation ring from her finger, gazed at it dreamily, and she held it up for all to see.

"Gentlemen," she continued, "when I received this ring I bound myself in marriage to our fair realm of England. Can you name a better husband?" For a moment she felt her courage failing her so she hastened to add in ringing tones: "It will be a more than sufficient memorial to my name, *and* to my glory, if, when I die, the inscription on my tomb shall read— 'Here lieth Elizabeth who reigned, *and* died, a virgin.'"

Complimenting her later on her oratory, Cecil murmured that it had nevertheless disturbed him deeply.

"Why?"

"Madam, think of the many offers of marriage that will come, will indeed continue to come, while you remain unmarried. National and international emergencies will make at least their *consideration* vitally necessary. Yet now, having declared yourself—"

"Declared myself? Oh nonsense, man! At most I issued a challenge to every eligible prince in Europe. I fully understand what is expected of me. In order to survive as an independent country, England must play off this nation against that. In other words I, the queen, must play off this prince against that one. I am ready, heaven help me, to do battle in the royal marriage market. Does that satisfy you, Cecil?"

"Completely, madam!"

But dear heaven, she thought, there'd be mockery, not glory, in living and dying a virgin. She remembered Robin at sixteen saying, "Who wants to be a virgin?" Sweet Robin, she thought brokenly, she'd been terse with him of late, and through no fault of his.

"Send for Lord Robert Dudley," she said. "I'd like a little gaiety and know of no one better fitted to organize a masque or some such entertainment. Send for him, Cecil, send for him! At once!"

Chapter 26

"This year, next year, sometime, never; this year, next year—"

"What nonsense is this, you great idiot?" Elizabeth demanded.

Robin Dudley, lounging at a near-by table while she completed her toilette, had been eating cherries and was now busily reducing, one by one, the little heap of stones in front of him. He looked up with a smile.

"As good a way as any, madam, of discovering when the queen will marry."

Elizabeth's ladies, after a quick study of her face, laughed merrily.

"Pray continue," she said indulgently.

Robin did so and, coming presently to the last stone, said, "Ah, *sometime*. Had it been 'never,' I vow I'd have lost one stone and started all over again."

"Send your cherry stones to the foreign ambassadors," Eliza-

beth suggested. "No amount of diplomatic speculation will give them any better answer than sometime."

"Ah, but the name of the bridegroom is what they want, not the exact year of marriage." Robin gathered the stones together and began the game again. "The Archduke Charles, Eric of Sweden, the Duke of Holstein—" he looked up—"there are others, a whole host of them, but these three worthy gentlemen seem to head the list of possibilities, so—the Archduke Charles, Eric of Sweden, the Duke of—"

"Enough!" Elizabeth said harshly, and this time there was no laughter from her ladies.

The court was now at Windsor Castle, and here, as at Whitehall or Hampton Court, or any other royal residence, Lord Robert Dudley occupied apartments close to Elizabeth's own. He had lounged into her dressing room a few minutes ago unannounced and confident as ever. Whether he was greeted with a smile or a frown, he felt sure of not being turned away. Elizabeth had already made him a knight of the garter and granted him certain rich trading monopolies.

The gossip that had linked their names before the coronation had grown apace during the past year, and it was now widely believed that the queen and her "sweet Robin" were lovers. This tickled her vanity and added somewhat to her prestige as a woman. In her own eyes, too, it gave the lie to the fact, known only to herself, that neither Robin nor any other man could ever be quite that.

"It seemed to me," Dudley remarked, when Elizabeth had dismissed her ladies, "that your eyes snapped angrily at my mention of the Archduke Charles."

The Archduke Charles, a son of the Emperor of Germany, was also a cousin of Philip of Spain. Marriage between him and Elizabeth had been suggested by Philip himself. Philip, for his part, had suddenly and unexpectedly married a French princess. This French alliance had infuriated Elizabeth. It was insulting that Philip should have turned from her so quickly and married the French girl. And the marriage itself was a definite threat to English security.

Elizabeth had tried to counter the threat by making a hasty

and uneasy peace with France. Then to her relief a growing opposition to Philip had developed in France itself. Shortly thereafter the King of France had died and the sickly Francis II had mounted the throne. This had brought about a new threat, for Francis was married to Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, who called herself Queen of England as well.

"Our problems become more and more complicated," Cecil had remarked, and this was true, for the French forces which were stationed in Scotland had been increased. The French intention seemed clear enough: the promotion of a Catholic rising in England followed by an advance of French forces from Scotland into England.

A quick, bold move was indicated. Apart from the threat of a Catholic rising, Elizabeth felt secure enough at home. The crown debts left by Mary had been liquidated, and the coinage, debased during the two previous reigns, had been fully restored. England was tentatively at peace within her own borders; a new navy and a new army were in the making. So it had seemed that a surprise defeat of French mercenaries in Scotland would discourage even the more foolhardy Catholic lords from revolting against the English crown. Accordingly Elizabeth had dispatched a force of eight thousand men to Scotland. Meanwhile she kept Philip from active intervention by continuing marriage negotiations with the Archduke Charles, the prince of his choice.

One thing in Elizabeth's favor had been the rising against French domination of the Scottish Lords of the Congregation. Cecil had stimulated this revolt by a judicious distribution of English gold. Elizabeth's own forces had given the Scottish reformers adequate protection, and the French forces had been scattered. There had been no official war; Elizabeth was still against that. On the surface she had done no more than attempt to restore order in Scotland, and William Cecil, going to Scotland himself, had negotiated terms with the Lords of the Congregation. And now the Treaty of Edinburgh had been brought into being. However, it was still unratified, for Mary Stuart herself refused to acknowledge Elizabeth Tudor as the true and rightful Queen of England.

"Play with your cherry stones again, Robin," Elizabeth said

offhandedly. "Discover, if you can, when Mary Stuart will bow to my wishes."

"I still hold the same number of stones," he pointed out. "The answer is obviously sometime. On the other hand—" he grinned and threw three cherry stones to the floor—"the answer is never, as far as the Archduke Charles is concerned."

Having sensed Robin's personal opposition all along, Elizabeth said sharply, "The choice is mine, my lord, not yours."

He smiled broadly. "I had a notion, dear Bess, that the choice might be William Cecil's."

"Your resentment of Cecil is not very intelligent," she told him lightly.

Robin shrugged easily. "You managed to hold King Philip at bay while restoring order in Scotland. Therefore a continued interest in Charles is no longer necessary."

Elizabeth looked at him thoughtfully. It was clear enough that Robin wanted to be her consort. Troubled, she recalled recent gossip which Cecil had brought to her. Lord Robert Dudley, the story went, had declared that if he had the courage he would kill his wife to clear the way for such a marriage. Watching him closely, she mentioned this now.

"A foul suggestion!" he cried heatedly.

"Foul indeed! Did you actually utter those stupid words?"

"My dear Bess," he said earnestly, "Amy is in poor health. I did say once that her death would be of benefit to me. That and no more."

Bent now on teasing him, Elizabeth said quietly: "To play off Spain against France, France against Spain, is likely to be a weary, endless task. Spain, after all, is the more powerful of the two, and is likely to remain so. Perhaps I should bring the silly game to a close by securing a firm Spanish alliance."

"Through marriage with the Archduke Charles, you mean?"

"What else, my dear Robin?"

"One of the ugliest men in Europe, this Charles," Robin said sulkily.

"Ugliness scarcely matters, in a marriage of convenience."

"But Bess, could you really marry a foreigner? Why not an Englishman you used to argue?"

"So very patriotic of me," Elizabeth said, "but marriage with

a foreign prince who would bring England security would be more to the point. No Englishman could bring me that. I could only marry an Englishman, and then selfishly, if I were in love with him."

Robin laughed softly. "I think I can flatter myself that you love at least one Englishman."

"Nonsense! It was just a game."

"Was it just a game when you turned me away that night at the Tower, and later when you barred the door against me? Was it, Bess?"

"It was no game," she admitted.

"You were held back because of my wife. Duty, honor, call it what you will. Clearly you want marriage or nothing."

"Or nothing."

"Which means that if the way *were* clear—I!"

"It means nothing of the kind," Elizabeth interrupted harshly. "I want marriage or nothing, whoever the man might be."

"An impossible situation, isn't it!"

"Impossible, yes."

They were talking at cross purposes and that, for her own peace of mind, Elizabeth thought, was just as well. She dismissed him abruptly, fully satisfied that he had believed her excuse. Still, it was obvious enough that he was anxious to prevent her from marrying anyone else.

Just how desperately the anxiety had become was revealed a few days later by William Cecil. "Lord Robert Dudley is a most clumsy intriguer," Cecil remarked. "Have I your permission, madam, to tell you what he has done?"

"If you think it necessary," Elizabeth said guardedly.

Cecil inclined his head. "At one time it was thought that Your Majesty leaned more to marrying the Earl of Arran than the Archduke Charles."

In the continual game of pretense, this had indeed been true. Arran was Mary Stuart's heir to the Scottish throne. Marriage with him, the suggestion of which had been solely designed to alarm the French, would have weakened Mary's influence in Scotland, she being at best an absentee Queen.

"Lord Robert," Cecil continued, "took elaborate steps to prevent the Arran match. He told the Spanish ambassador that he

knew of a plot to poison you, if a marriage contract were signed. He added that he had revealed the plot to you, and you were so alarmed that you had all but agreed to marry the Archduke Charles."

"The supposed plot was engineered by—whom?"

"France."

"Did the Spanish ambassador believe Dudley's ridiculous story?"

"For a time, yes, but he soon saw, as indeed I think we all see, that Lord Robert was taking a hasty and temporary measure to prevent Your Majesty from marrying the Earl of Arran."

Elizabeth laughed dryly. "Then, I suppose, he would have been faced with the task of preventing my marriage to the archduke. He is, in fact, still faced with that task. As you say, a most clumsy intriguer, that sweet Robin of mine."

Cecil gave her his most candid look. "So I have always judged him, and I have known Dudley for many years."

But as she and Cecil were talking, Elizabeth wondered why, since Robin had served her so well in the past, she had never even thought of rewarding him with an important appointment. She supposed she had been guided by instinct, just as she had been so guided in making Cecil her secretary of state.

"I wonder what action Robin will take now concerning the Archduke Charles?" she said thoughtfully. "I strongly urge you, Cecil, to have him closely watched."

"I was about to suggest the same thing, madam."

Elizabeth regarded this as an amusing game, a little light relief when light relief was always welcome, but the game of watching Robin through Cecil's spies was soon clouded by tragedy. For Cecil came to her hastily one morning with the news that Robin's wife, the Lady Amy, had suddenly died and in a mysterious fashion.

"She was living at Cumnor Hall in Oxfordshire," Cecil went on gravely. "Her servants, who had been absent at Abingdon fair, returned to find her lying at the bottom of a stairway. Her neck was broken."

Elizabeth looked at him in horror.

"And the tragedy, coming on top of so many rumors, is bound to be received avidly by the gossips."

"Dudley's words were twisted," she said angrily.

"People are uncharitable at the best of times, madam. No one will believe that now." Cecil paused for a moment, then added quietly, "Lord Robert has been absent from court for the last three days."

"Can the news be hushed up, her death ascribed to illness?"

Cecil shook his head. "Things have gone too far, madam. An inquest is inevitable."

"You were keeping a watch on Dudley. Did he visit Cumnor Hall?"

"We only watched his dealings with foreign agents."

"Have all possible inquiries made," Elizabeth decided after a moment's frantic thought. "And one thing I insist on: the result of the inquest must be a verdict of accidental death."

Robin returned to court later in the day. Elizabeth received him at once, in private. He was pale and looked deeply shaken.

"Obviously you have heard the news," Elizabeth commented. "Yes."

"A ghastly accident, Robin."

"Accident? I myself would call it suicide."

"Why do you believe this?"

"Amy sent her servants away. All of them, mind you. At her command they went to the fair. Not a single maid did she keep with her. She was quite alone in the house."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Amy told me."

"So you were there!"

He sighed deeply. "During the morning. For an hour only. Amy was despondent. She had heard the foul gossip. She accused me of plotting her death. She said she might as well make an end of herself and save me the trouble."

"Did she commit suicide while you were there?" Elizabeth asked coldly.

"Bess!"

"Did she?"

"No. I suspect now that she was planning to kill herself even before I arrived. I should have brought her away with me. I see that clearly."

"Did you push her down the stairs?"

"That's a disgusting thing to suggest!" Robin cried angrily.

"You meant nothing to each other. Why should she want to kill herself?"

Robin sighed deeply again. "I may as well tell you, Bess, that I tried some time ago to discuss divorce with her."

"Divorce?"

"But Amy wouldn't listen. Soon after the coronation I had to meet her and discuss family affairs. After that she kept finding excuses for further meetings. She came to London several times. She said she was in love with me, and I must admit I had to believe her. She said a woman's love had replaced a girl's indifference."

"Why did you go to Cumnor Hall?"

"To try to make her see reason."

"And you failed."

Robin was beginning to look desperate. "You think I killed her!"

"No, Robin, but other people will."

"Yes, I know! Killed her to make the way clear for me! Good God, Bess, would I have been such a fool? Even to be suspected of killing Amy makes it impossible for me ever to be your consort. Surely you realize that!"

"Of course, Robin," Elizabeth said, in considerable relief.

Two days later Cecil made his report. The facts seemed to support Robin's own story. Lady Amy's servants had testified that their mistress had indeed sent them away. They had also testified that she had been behaving strangely of late, had suggested several times that attempts were being made to poison her.

"I agree," Cecil said, "that the Lady Amy killed herself, but dare we let Dudley attend the inquest and give evidence there?"

Elizabeth shook her head. She, the queen, had suffered enough discredit as it was. A verdict of suicide would imply that she had separated a man from his wife and the wife had then killed herself.

When at last the inquest took place, it resulted in an open verdict, contrary to Elizabeth's expressed desire. Without the risk of bringing her name into the inquiry, Cecil had been unable to influence a verdict of accidental death.

"An open verdict leaves much in doubt," Elizabeth said sadly. "I know now that I can't, even in a moment of weakness, marry Dudley."

Chapter 27

"A fine wardrobe," Mrs. Ashley commented. "No queen ever possessed a finer, I do declare! Think of it, madam! Four hundred gowns, four hundred! More than one for each day of the year!"

Elizabeth nodded her satisfaction. "We shall double that number before long."

The passion for clothes, since she had possessed so few in early days, had grown upon her rapidly, and there was nothing she enjoyed more than an inspection of the royal wardrobe. The object of today's inspection was to withdraw such gowns as were no longer fashionable, but Elizabeth, something of a hoarder, knew quite well that when it came to the point, she wouldn't have the heart to reject any of them.

"Ah!" Mrs. Ashley exclaimed, "what have we here? Surely this is the gown which King Philip presented at Hatfield. I wonder if it becomes you still?"

"And why shouldn't it?" Elizabeth demanded indignantly. "My figure has changed in no way. Come, help me, Ashley, I have a fancy to wear it again."

Dressed in the gown, she examined her reflection critically in the mirror. She would be twenty-eight next September and looked just as young, she decided, as she'd looked when Philip, thinking to bribe her, had given her this lovely gown. She would keep it always, she told herself, if only as a reminder that Philip, failing then, would always fail. And now after Mrs. Ashley had placed the matching toque on her head, Elizabeth adjusted it for herself and peered closely into the mirror. Instantly her face froze in horror. What was it Mary had asked so spitefully? "Your hair has a thin look; is it falling out?" She peered more closely still. There was a decided thinness at the temples. Worse, it ex-

tended upward to the crown. She tugged at a few strands; they came away in her hand. The inherited taint, Mary had suggested. Then the mirror showed her Mrs. Ashley's expression, even though that lady turned hastily away.

"Ashley!" she shrieked. "Had you noticed?"

"It sometimes happens," the poor woman faltered. "Your Majesty suffered a high fever a few months ago. The hair will grow again."

"Have others noticed?"

"I doubt it, madam. There has been no gossip."

Elizabeth felt utterly humiliated. It *was* the inherited taint. She knew this for certain now. High fever had nothing to do with it. Not months after the event.

"Wigs have been fashionable from time to time in the past," Mrs. Ashley suggested.

Elizabeth snatched at this. "Then I shall revive the fashion. Too much hair is often a nuisance, especially in the heat of summer. I'll shave it off, all of it. That will make it grow more thickly. Meanwhile I'll sport a whole series of wigs dressed in a whole range of fashionable new designs. Find the best wig-maker in London and bring him to me."

In considerable agitation, and still wearing Philip's gown, she went to her study and there found William Cecil waiting for her. She fancied that he looked at her strangely. She distracted his attention by remarking that he appeared to be limping more painfully than usual, for of late he had complained of gout. After that she felt a little easier in her mind and inquired briskly the subject of the morning's business.

"Scotland, madam. Affairs there are coming to a head at last."

It was clear enough what he meant. Mary Stuart's mother, the queen regent, had died eight months ago, and her death had been followed by that of Mary's husband, the King of France. With a new king on the French throne, Mary was unwanted now in France, and though she dallied there she had really no option but to return to her own country.

"Has the Queen of Scotland made up her mind at last?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, madam, and she requests the granting of a passport

which will enable her to travel in safety through Your Majesty's realm."

"How generous of her to say *my* realm while still refusing to ratify the Treaty of Edinburgh. Is she as beautiful as people say?"

"People are apt to exaggerate," Cecil said diplomatically. "Her youthful attractiveness has yet to show promise of mature beauty."

But Elizabeth had seen a portrait, and allowing even for the flattery of the painter's brush, there was no doubt about Mary Stuart's claim to beauty. She had luxuriant hair, too, and that was intolerable.

"Why does she ask for a passport? Is she afraid I might detain her in England?"

"I myself suspect a spirit of defiance."

"Ah, she longs to flaunt her beauty in every town and hamlet between London and Edinburgh. The request is refused."

"Do you really wish to commit yourself so definitely, madam?"

This had long been Cecil's stock retort whenever Elizabeth made an impulsive decision.

"No," she laughed. "Negotiate. Keep her dangling as we keep the Archduke Charles dangling. Draw the Scottish queen's attention to the unratified Treaty of Edinburgh."

"Very good, madam," Cecil said suavely. "Nevertheless," he added thoughtfully, "I expect the defiance to continue. The Queen of Scotland is a stubborn woman."

And Cecil was right, for he was able to report, some weeks later, that Mary Stuart had decided to leave for Scotland without the requested passport.

"By way of England?" Elizabeth asked in surprise.

"No, madam. By sea the whole way to Scotland."

Elizabeth was now wearing her first wig. It gave her a certain reckless confidence. The wig had been much admired and was a richer shade of red than her own hair. Her ladies, and other women of high station, had been quick to follow her lead, though careful, too, that their wigs should not outmode the queen's.

"Cecil," she purred, "the moment you learn that Mary Stuart

has embarked, send a passport to the French court. And—"
"Yes?"

"And instruct such pirates as you may have in your pay to intercept her in the Narrow Seas."

"May I ask why, madam?" Cecil smiled.

"She needs to be taught a lesson, the haughty bitch. Have her intercepted by pirates, but also have a naval galley on hand to rescue her. She can then be brought to an English port. Good manners, if she possesses them, will oblige her to come to court to thank me personally."

"Your Majesty proposes to hold her at court?"

"Certainly! But not by obvious force. All kinds of entertainment shall be provided in her honor, week after week. In the end, *after* she has ratified the Treaty of Edinburgh, she shall make a royal progress from London to Edinburgh."

The next day the new Spanish ambassador, Alvaro de Quadra, Bishop of Aquila, asked for a private audience. Evidently Philip was anxious to know something of her plans for Mary Stuart. Elizabeth granted the request at once, and preparing herself for an exciting battle of wits, received the bishop with deceptive sweetness.

De Quadra had replaced Count de Feria. He was an old man of majestic appearance; his manner showed the dignity of the churchman and the suavity of the polished diplomat. "I have with me," he announced, "a newly arrived portrait of the Archduke Charles. Have I Your Majesty's permission to present it?"

"Most certainly. My gallery of would-be husbands grows month by month."

He laughed politely and called in a liveried servant. The portrait was placed against a wall. One of the ugliest men in Europe, Robin had termed the archduke, and Elizabeth was inclined now to agree.

"A skillful piece of work," she commented.

"The artist has certainly caught the archduke's most characteristic expression."

"He is always apt to sneer, then?"

"If Your Majesty will move a little to the left, the light from

the window will turn what looks like a sneer into a pleasant smile."

Elizabeth moved a little to the left. "His head is far too large."

"He has a reputation for great intellect."

"Brains of that size would intimidate me."

"I am willing to concede," De Quadra went on amiably, "that the archduke is by no means as handsome as many of the gentlemen at Your Majesty's court—as, for example, the dear Lord Robert Dudley." An angelic smile lighted his face. "King Philip has a considerable regard for Lord Robert, and Lord Robert is suitably grateful to His Majesty."

"Grateful?"

"King Philip caused Lord Robert's release from the Tower."

Elizabeth had quite forgotten this but considered the matter of no importance.

"It is more than possible," De Quadra ventured, "that Lord Robert, in repayment of the old debt, would gladly agree to anything King Philip might ask of him."

"For example?" Elizabeth asked flatly.

"Lord Robert is a widower. I had in mind the question of his remarriage."

"The bride, I take it, to be chosen by King Philip?"

"At all events *approved* of by King Philip."

Elizabeth began to wonder if Mary Stuart would be Philip's choice. It seemed quite possible. Philip had no wish to see Mary on the English throne, not unless there was an unexpected change in Spanish policy. And if she were married to Robin, over whom the shadow of Amy's death would always hang, Mary's hopes in that direction would be considerably lessened.

"May I know her name, De Quadra?"

"I mean none other than Elizabeth Tudor."

Whereupon he begged permission to withdraw. The queen was shocked and momentarily deprived of speech, so he went softly from the room. Elizabeth Tudor, she thought, and stared blankly at the archduke's portrait. Presently she thought over carefully everything De Quadra had said. The bishop must know quite well that the ghost of Robin's wife would stand forever between her and Robin, so far as marriage was concerned. Still puzzled and furious as well, she sent at once for Cecil.

The minister listened to her patiently and then said: "Lord Robert Dudley has had three secret meetings with De Quadra during the last two days. I suggest, madam, that as yet King Philip knows nothing of what seems to be only another of Lord Robert's clumsy intrigues."

"I'll have a talk with Dudley," Elizabeth said angrily and sent for him immediately.

Robin entered the presence chamber jauntily. He was wearing a peascod doublet of sky-blue silk braided with gold, a high linen collar instead of a ruff, and venetians, the new style of breeches imported from Venice, of gold and gray brocade. He also wore the latest fashion in netherstocks, whose openwork Puritans considered shocking. A short black velvet cloak lined with sable hung loosely from his shoulders, while his feet were encased in white satin slippers. Altogether an entrancing sight that set her heart beating excitedly. Nevertheless she clung to her anger and scowled as only she knew how to scowl.

"You clumsy fool!" she raged.

"Ah," he said, his manner still jaunty, "De Quadra has talked with you."

"You must have been completely out of your mind!"

"A man desperately in love often seems insane, dear Bess."

"But a man desperately keen for power should remain clear-headed!"

"And shrewd also," Robin countered. "I was certainly shrewd. How much did De Quadra tell you?"

"He merely suggested that King Philip might approve of a marriage between you and me."

"He made no mention of the ways and means?"

"No mention whatever."

"Time," Robin pronounced, "heals the most desperate ills."

"Time will never heal the ill caused by your wife's death."

"It could be wiped out in the twinkling of an eye."

"Continue," Elizabeth commanded curtly.

"King Philip is the acknowledged champion of Catholicism in Europe. Converting heretics is becoming a passion with him. But conquest by conversion rather than by the sword is his present aim. What a feather it would be in his cap if, through you and me, Philip could restore England to the fold."

"Make yourself clear, Robin!"

"Oh, a ruse on my part, merely a ruse. We could always recant, once the pope, pressed by Philip, had given us his blessing."

"This," she said helplessly, "is an even clumsier intrigue than your silly attempt to prevent me from marrying the Earl of Arran. De Quadra must have realized it, too. Obviously he hoped to make me so angry that I'd commit myself to marry the Archduke Charles without further argument."

"I don't agree," Robin said stubbornly. "Philip knows that in your heart of hearts you would prefer marriage with an Englishman in order to assure the succession of a purely English heir."

Suddenly Elizabeth began to feel desperate, unhappy, and entirely alone. "Such a clever little Robin," she said, forcing a laugh to mask the misery that was twisting her heart. "You want the truth? Very well! The truth is this: as Queen of England, I could not marry you or any other Englishman. All Englishmen are my subjects. A queen in her own right can't marry a subject."

"I'm still as puzzled as ever," he said slowly.

"Puzzled? What is there to be puzzled about?"

"Knowing you as I do, Bess, I can't help feeling that your talk of honor and duty was meant to mislead me. Why don't you confide in me, let me help you if I can?"

Elizabeth looked at him in dismay. How wrong she'd been, thinking she had deceived him!

"I'll confide in nobody!" she burst out and instantly regretted her words.

"Not even a physician?"

"And set the whole court gossiping?"

Again, too late, she regretted her words.

"Gossiping about what, Bess?"

"People will gossip about anything, anything!" she evaded. "Remember how you suffered because of your wife's death."

Robin came to her and took her in his arms, and, finding comfort in his light embrace, she remained there, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Your chief physician is supposed to be a man of honor," he

said, "but if you feel unable to trust him, why not consult another, secretly?" He laughed boyishly. "You could wear a disguise. A black wig, a foreign accent—and there you are! Let me arrange it for you, Bess."

She tore herself angrily from his arms. "A pretty little game! And what an imagination you have! Get out of my sight! That is a royal command, my lord. I want no more of you. Leave court within an hour or I'll have you placed under arrest."

Robin bowed deeply. "Exile in the country, madam?"

"In the country for the time being, later abroad."

He bowed again. "The queen is angry, but the woman will soon forgive."

Missing him the moment he had left the palace, Elizabeth wanted to call him back, but she told herself that womanly forgiveness would be nothing short of womanly weakness. She could manage without him; there were others to amuse her.

Nevertheless she passed a miserable week and only found relief by flying into a temper when Cecil told her that Mary Stuart had evaded capture by the hired pirates and had landed safely in Scotland.

"She would have been safer at Calais," Elizabeth said darkly.

"With the intolerant John Knox to thunder against her on one hand, her Catholic lords squabbling amongst themselves on the other, I am inclined to agree."

But Elizabeth's mind was occupied now with a new thought.

"Her galley captured by your pirates—did it contain much personal baggage?"

"Yes, madam."

"Clothes in plenty, no doubt. The very latest of French fashions." Elizabeth laughed merrily. "Have the whole lot brought to Whitehall. Rummaging among the stuff will keep me and Dudley occupied for days."

"Lord Robert is to return from exile, then?"

"Exile? Who spoke of exile?"

"It was naturally assumed, madam—"

"—that I was displeased with his last silly intrigue. Well, so I was, but sweet Robin will have learned his lesson by now. As for De Quadra, you may tell him that I have no intention

of marrying Lord Robert Dudley, but am still interested, quite deeply interested, in the Archduke Charles."

Chapter 28

The court physicians were standing in a little group near the bedchamber window, nodding their heads solemnly, conversing in whispers which sounded to Elizabeth like the buzzing of flies on a dung heap. At first she thought that there were four of them, but their number seemed to multiply, reduce and multiply again. Turning with difficulty in her bed, she strained her ears, catching first the phrase "A most grave condition," then "The delirium is an added complication."

"Gentlemen!" she commanded, but apparently they either failed to hear or refused to obey.

Delirium, she thought resentfully. She might be dying but she had never been delirious in her life, never!

She had fallen ill . . . how many days ago? She couldn't remember, and it didn't seem to matter, but she did know that the illness was the ever-present scourage, smallpox. Why *smallpox*, she asked herself. If her smallpox was so death-dealing a complaint, why not be honest and call it *largepox*? Physicians at the best were a foolish band of muddlers. She laughed aloud, most contemptuously, but still they failed to take notice.

Elizabeth Tudor delirious, she thought—what utter nonsense! She was clearer in her mind than ever before. She knew her name, that was proof enough. It was Elizabeth Tudor, but to fool them all she had told them that it was *Mary* Tudor. And what a joke that was! Mary Tudor, who had recently become the secret wife of dear, sweet Robin Dudley. Chuckling to herself, she fell into a fitful slumber from which she woke shaken by a feeling of vast indignation.

"That woman in my bed," she said angrily, "her snoring—a horrible clicking noise—keeps waking me up."

"Your Majesty, I fear, was making the unfortunate noises yourself."

It was William Cecil who had spoken. She looked at the solemn idiot in complete disbelief.

"Rubbish!" she snapped. "It was that woman. This woman never snores."

She wasn't at all sure now that he was Cecil; he looked more like Bishop Gardiner. She glanced beyond him and saw a large gathering of grave-faced gentlemen.

"We of Your Majesty's privy council regret the need to disturb you at such a time," Cecil-who-looked-like-Gardiner said apologetically, "but we feel it essential to ask Your Majesty to name your successor. Unless definite action is taken, madam, the Queen of Scotland might come to the throne."

She chuckled to herself. Nothing was less likely, and in good time, the moment she died, in fact, they would discover it for themselves. Definite action had indeed been taken. She had been pregnant for almost the full nine months, but had kept her condition carefully hidden. A Caesarean operation would be performed and the living child within the husk of her own dead body would leap forth and claim the throne. A boy, a girl, it scarcely mattered. The important thing was that the new monarch should have adequate protection.

"Your Majesty . . ."

"Hold your tongue, Gardiner. Can't you see I'm deep in thought?"

Adequate protection. . . . A lord protector, in short, and who better for so exalted a position than the child's father? The Archduke Charles— No, what nonsense! That at all events was near-delirium! The dear, sweet Robin, he who would come forward after her death with complete and legal proof of the secret marriage, must be the protector of his baby son.

"Gardiner," she said, "I have a command for you."

"I am ready as ever to obey, madam."

It was Cecil after all. Gardiner would never have said a thing like that. He would have said, "Confess your fault, admit that you slept with Philip of Spain and are now with child by him."

"This is my command," she said. "Lord Robert Dudley shall be raised to the peerage and granted a pension of twenty thousand pounds a year during his lifetime. And further, he shall be created lord protector of England and remain in that office

during—" She checked herself quickly; no need to say "during the minority of our child," they'd find out that soon enough; better to be cunning, really cunning. "During the life of my legal heir," she concluded.

Cecil made a reply which she failed to catch, and since he continued to mumble stupidly, she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"A royal command has been issued, Cecil. Obey it. Prepare the necessary letters patent and present them for my signature."

After that she dozed fitfully again, waking once in the belief that she was already dead, yet again in the belief that she was far too hardy a creature to succumb even to the most virulent attack of smallpox. As the days passed she was dimly aware of being forcibly fed; she could taste the chicken broth in her mouth. This seemed to her complete proof that she was still on earth, for in heaven, whether it be the heaven of the Catholics, or the heaven of the Protestants, or even the heaven of that wretch John Knox, food would be quite unnecessary.

She woke one morning to find the sun streaming through the window at which the little group of physicians was again gathered. There were four of them and their number remained unchanged. Moreover, she could hear quite distinctly what they were saying.

"A remarkable change for the better!" one cried.

"I quite agree," she chipped in. "Elizabeth Tudor is a very hard nut to crack."

She dismissed them and sent at once for William Cecil. His face was wreathed in smiles and, showing an effusiveness she would never have expected of him, he kissed her hand, laughed and wept all in the same moment, and kissed her hand again.

"God bless Your Majesty," he said.

"God saved me, Cecil. I can only hope that He will also bless me. Now tell me how long I've been ill."

"More than two weeks, madam."

Elizabeth searched her mind, grasping unsuccessfully at the dim memories hovering there. She had a feeling that at some time or other during the illness she had made a fool of herself.

"I seem to recall having issued a royal command. If so, what was it?"

"Your Majesty wanted Lord Robert Dudley raised to the peerage, granted a pension of twenty thousand pounds a year and created in addition lord protector of England."

"So vast a sum! In my right mind I'd never have been as generous as that. Was my royal command obeyed?"

Cecil shook his head. "We of the council decided to procrastinate."

"And rightly so!" She struggled hard to remember everything, for she was sure that she had made a fool of herself to a greater extent than that. "If, during the delirium, I said anything stupid, I want to know what it was."

Cecil hesitated.

"Speak up," she commanded. "If your words make me angry, the anger will be directed against myself, not you."

"Madam, you spoke of having made a secret marriage with Lord Robert Dudley. That, you said, was your reason for wanting to make him lord protector. Fortunately I was alone with you at the time."

"A secret marriage! How ridiculous!"

"The subject was, of course, on your mind. We had heard a rumor of such a marriage before you were taken ill."

"Yes, I remember. Naturally no such marriage ever took place."

"You put my mind at rest, madam."

"Did I say anything else?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

But Elizabeth had seized upon one memory and grasped it firmly. During the delirium she had decided to make Robin the protector of their unborn child! So vivid was the memory now that she clutched at her stomach. To her relief, yet a relief tinged with disappointment, it was perfectly flat. She remembered Mary and the imaginary pregnancies. What a warning that was! She would have to watch herself carefully in the future, keep her other self, that woman who had snored in the bed, firmly in place.

Having dismissed Cecil, she dwelt somberly on Mary and her

pitiful craziness. Mary, of course, had at least known a man. It came upon her then that she must settle the question of the curse once and for all, before it resulted in a mania far worse than Mary's. She sent for Robin Dudley.

"Make what arrangements you can for me," she said briefly. "You know what I mean. But I insist on secrecy, Robin, complete secrecy."

Chapter 29

"If it please Your Majesty . . ."

"Well, what is it, Katherine? I dismissed you for the night with the others. What do you want of me?"

"Nothing, madam, nothing," the girl stammered and burst into a flood of tears.

Staring at her, Elizabeth recalled that this lady-in-waiting, Lady Katherine Grey, usually light-hearted and frolicsome, had been listless and pensive of late, and at times neglectful of her duties. Well, whatever Katherine's trouble was, Elizabeth thought indignantly, her mind was fully occupied with her own. Robin had at last found a physician who would have little chance of betraying her secret. For not only was the man, an Italian by birth, said to be most skilled in women's complaints, but also he was lying in prison under sentence of death, having been found guilty of the murder of his wife's lover. Nevertheless, with plans completed for a secret meeting, Elizabeth had hesitated to take the final step. And still she hesitated, even though the Italian physician was to go to the block tomorrow morning.

"A woman who cries about nothing is either hysterical or a complete idiot," she told Katherine Grey. "You are neither. If you have a request to make, make it at once and be done with it."

Katherine looked up pathetically. "Madam, I have a mind to marry and seek your gracious permission."

"Marry?"

Katherine nodded and burst into tears again.

Elizabeth looked at her broodingly. This was a serious matter

and Katherine was behaving with the utmost impudence. She was a sister of the late Jane Grey and had already been suggested by Cecil and others as Elizabeth's heir, should the queen die childless. Therefore the girl had no right, being so close to the throne, to choose a husband for herself. That was the queen's prerogative.

"Tell me the man's name," Elizabeth said sharply.

"The Earl of Hertford, madam."

"Quite unsuitable!" Elizabeth snapped..

Hertford was the eldest son of the late Lord Protector Somerset and because of his father's perfidious conduct he was lucky to be alive. Katherine, for that matter, because of her sister's attempt to seize the throne, was also lucky to be alive. No doubt both Katherine and Hertford were innocent enough, but Elizabeth was in an unreasonable frame of mind. Would-be traitors, both of them! And linked together in marriage, who knew what foul scheme they might not hatch!

"I love him to distraction," Katherine wailed.

"Nevertheless, you shall marry only when I choose, and your husband shall be a man of *my* selection.

"Would Your Majesty have me stand dishonored before the whole world!"

"Dishonored?"

Katherine threw back her head, a real Tudor gesture. "Fearing Your Majesty's disapproval, we were swept away beyond all endurance."

"Are you trying to tell me that you now carry Hertford's child?"

Katherine kept her head high. "Yes, madam."

"One would never guess it. Is this a trick to force my hand?"

"The farthingale can hide more than a poor figure."

"Shameless creature!" Elizabeth said but quickly checked the additional scathing words that came to her lips. The situation, she felt, was one that might be used to her own advantage. "Have you consulted a physician?"

"I assure you, madam—"

"Hold your tongue! In your case we must make absolutely sure. A foreign physician, a man who won't be able to gossip later, shall examine you."

Keeping Katherine in the royal apartments, Elizabeth locked her in an antechamber. Then she sent for Robin, who was now a privy councilor. She had appointed him to the council to mitigate his disappointment at not being made lord protector.

"I want you to bring the Italian physician to court at once," she said. "And under guard, of course."

"But Bess," Robin reminded her, "the plan was for you to meet him secretly at a secluded house in the city."

"My dear Robin, I was ill when I agreed to that ridiculous plan and incapable of making serious decisions. I have no intention of meeting him now, here or elsewhere. Katherine Grey has been up to mischief. I want her examined, but secretly. Bring the Italian to the palace. Take him straight to Katherine's chamber. Let him enter, but remain outside yourself with the guard. Instruct the guard to return him to prison the moment he emerges."

Robin shrugged. "Whatever you wish."

Well aware that Dudley was more than mildly suspicious, she sent for the captain of the palace guard the moment he was gone.

"Lord Robert Dudley," she explained to the officer, "will come to the palace presently with an Italian prisoner who is under sentence of death. Lord Robert will admit the man to Lady Katherine Grey's chamber. Once he has done that, you will place Lord Robert under arrest, take him to his own apartments and keep him there with a guard on the door to await my pleasure."

She saw the captain hide a smile. Clearly he was thinking that the favorite had displeased the queen in some way, possibly by flirting with Katherine.

"Once the Italian emerges, you will see that he is returned to prison. The death sentence will be carried out at the appointed time tomorrow morning. Are my wishes clearly understood?"

"Clearly, Your Majesty."

So far so good! She donned a jet-black wig, one which had been made for a masque which was to be held at the end of the week, and smothered her cheeks in paint. This done to her satisfaction, she went to Katherine's chamber, which was connected by an inner door with her own apartments, and waited, impatient to have the whole thing over and done with while her resolution was still high.

Sooner than she had expected, there was a tramp of feet in the corridor, then a light tap on the outer door. Remaining hidden while opening it, she slammed and locked the door the moment the Italian had entered.

"Signor," she said, addressing him in his own language, "I am one of the queen's ladies. You are here to make an examination and give an honest opinion."

"What manner of examination?" he asked.

Elizabeth, conscious only of his large, sad eyes, gave him a complete account of what she termed her "condition." The words stuck in her throat at first, but came more freely when she forced herself to speak in the most businesslike of phrases. It was a help, too, to be talking in a foreign language.

"Well?" she demanded, when the examination had been completed.

"Madam, the trouble, in part, is caused by the development of a hysterical condition, the hysteria itself a result of past unhappy experiences. The ancient Greeks were not unacquainted with similar cases."

"You say—in part?"

"There is also a physical condition which the hysteria aggravates."

Elizabeth thought of something her stepmother had said. "Would it have been evident years ago?"

"I would say, madam, that you were born with it."

"Can the hysteria be cured?"

"Perhaps, but even so, childbearing would be an impossibility."

This, though not entirely unexpected, was a bitter blow.

Once he had given her this information, she led the doctor to the outer door, stood behind it while he went out, then locked it again. Leaning against the wall for a moment, she tried desperately to steady herself. There were still things to be done, things which, for the time being, would prevent the truth from taking full control of her mind.

She went quickly to the antechamber in which she had locked Katherine Grey. The girl had been weeping again. Her cheeks were blotchy, her eyes red and swollen.

"I decided against risking discovery, slight as the risk might

have been," Elizabeth said. "You shall go to the country and stay there until your baby is born."

"No good purpose will be served by that," Katherine sobbed.

"I think otherwise."

"But madam, the Earl of Hertford and I are already married. It was a secret ceremony. Had you given permission, we would have been married again, openly."

Elizabeth looked at her with icy calmness. "So you married Hertford, knowing that royal permission would be most unlikely; then you tried to force my hand."

"I fear I did, madam."

Elizabeth began to feel the greatest loathing for the girl. There she was, married to the man of her choice and with child by him. It was an infuriating thought. England was full of young women who had found a similar happiness. *That* was a more humiliating thought.

"You and Hertford have committed something close to treason," she went on. "A complete investigation shall be made. Meanwhile you shall go to the Tower as a state prisoner."

Elizabeth spent a sleepless night, fighting off the Italian's words one moment, brooding over them the next. She longed for the release of tears, but remained dry-eyed. Long ago she had set herself against weeping, except in anger, yet even with anger tearing at her heart now as never before, no tears came.

She rose early and sought relief, as she often did, in trying to write a few lines of poetry. After she had sat at her desk for a few moments, the first line came sluggishly: "I grieve, yet dare not show my grief." Then she changed the last word to "discontent." She had much more use, she thought, for discontent than grief. Expanding a bitter interest in her task, her mind ranging back and forth in the past, she flung down the pen. She realized that she had always wanted to love and be loved, yet she was left now with only resentment and a black hatred in her heart. She longed to tell the whole world the reason and thereby gain a little comfort, even a little sympathy, but she knew she must remain forever mute.

She seized the pen again. The lines now seething in her mind must be caught and held:

*I grieve, yet dare not show my discontent;
I love, and yet am forced to seem to hate;
I dote, but dare not what I ever meant.
I seem stark mute, yet inwardly do prate;
I am, and am not—freeze and yet I burn;
Since from myself my other self I turn.*

She reread the six lines with grim satisfaction. Inevitably, since anything she wrote, worthy or unworthy, brought high praise from the flattering courtiers, she would some day read aloud these lines. And nobody would ever guess their true meaning, for in part the composition had been instinctively cunning. She might well have been addressing the lines to a secret lover whose love, she being who she was, was tragically impossible. Carried away by this thought, yet expressing all she felt, she composed six more lines:

*My care is like my shadow in the sun—
Follows me flying—flies when I pursue it;
Stands and lives by me—does what I have done;
This too familiar care doth make me rue it;
No means I find to rid him from my breast,
Till by the end of things it be suppressed.*

V. Hatton

Chapter 30

"In heaven's name, what has happened to all the scullery maids?" Thomas Parry exclaimed. "I see only boys, strangers to me, for certain. Did I engage them in an absent-minded moment? I fail to remember. And the girls who were so pretty to look upon, did I dismiss them?"

Parry, a doddering old fellow these days, was peering short-sightedly about the royal kitchens. He was still agitated at Elizabeth's sudden decision to make an immediate inspection of the palace, and on reaching the kitchens had declared himself quite exhausted.

"I replaced the scullery maids myself," Elizabeth told him gently. "You were ill at the time. They were certainly pretty, you incorrigible old rogue, but lazy. The boys are much more efficient."

The dozen or more gentlemen attendants who had crowded into the kitchen behind Elizabeth looked at each other quickly, decided that they were called upon to laugh and did so loudly. Elizabeth rewarded them with a smile of approval. She had recently reorganized her personal guard, who now numbered fifty, each being a gentleman of irreproachable antecedents. She spoke of them as her pensioners but, keeping a careful watch on the royal exchequer, she was lax enough when it came to the actual payment of pensions.

The gentlemen were attired now, even though the occasion was anything but a ceremonial one, in gleaming suits of armor

and carried gold-plated battle-axes. An entrancing sight, Elizabeth thought, the more so since by royal command they bought their own expensive equipment.

"Dear me, now I come to think of it," old Parry remarked, "there are hardly any female servants left at court."

"So much the better. The dignity of a court—my court at all events—calls for a staff predominantly male."

"We shall soon see gentlemen in attendance even in the royal boudoir," Robin Dudley suggested.

"A possibility, my lord," Elizabeth agreed archly.

There was another burst of laughter from the pensioners.

"Now for the stables," she commanded.

What a delightful scandal, she thought, if she *did* adopt Robin's suggestion. As it was, she had already reduced her maids of honor to a mere eighteen. Women at court were an irritating nuisance. They were forever asking permission to marry and then were concerned solely with the bearing of children. The very thought of this angered her so much now that she made up her mind to keep an even closer watch on the eighteen maids of honor. Any suggestion of a love affair and there would be serious trouble for the girl involved. Marriages of convenience would be necessary from time to time in order to bind this or that noble family more closely to the court, but she, the queen, would arrange them, then send the young brides away before the sight of their enlarging bellies infuriated her beyond endurance.

"The cost of maintaining my household is ridiculously high," she remarked darkly while the inspection of the stables was under way. "Surely we can reduce expenses here, Parry. How many stable hands do I employ?"

"The number varies, madam. Sometimes as many as a hundred."

"Fantastic!"

"There are between three and four hundred horses in the royal stables," Parry pointed out.

"Sell half of them, then! No, wait! I get more pleasure out of hunting and hawking than anything else in this miserable life. Economize elsewhere. In the kitchens, for instance. My courtiers eat far too well. Do you happen to know, gentlemen, what yesterday's royal dinner cost? Cecil totted it up for me. Eight

pounds in the fully restored coinage! Eight pounds for no more than twelve people! Dudley, glutton that he is, ate two chickens and gobbled up three partridges in addition. And he and the others drank six pints of wine and four gallons of ale. See to it, Parry, that smaller meals are served in future."

Satisfied that the outburst had startled her pensioners, Elizabeth returned in high spirits to her apartments and finding William Cecil waiting for her, chuckled as she told him of her morning's activities.

"It might be said, Cecil, that I gave them all the rounds of the kitchen."

"And enjoyed it, madam."

"By God I did! You should have seen their faces! Nevertheless, they'll be swarming round me again within an hour, like flies at a honeypot, bowing, scraping, and flattering me outrageously."

"Honeypot," Cecil mused. "That, madam, is what the Queen of Scotland is being called."

"Are you suggesting that Mary Stuart is more attractive to men than I am?"

Cecil's lips twitched slightly. "Knox first used the name, meaning that the Queen of Scotland is an immoral woman."

"Is she?"

"She is fond of going about in men's clothing," Cecil said, his eyes twinkling, "but however immoral that might make her in Puritan eyes, King Philip is in no way disturbed. He has suggested—and this is a matter which needs urgent attention—that she should marry the Archduke Charles."

"In spite of the fact that I myself am still showing an interest in that same gentleman?"

"By now King Philip must suspect that Your Majesty has no intention of marrying the archduke."

It was almost three years since Mary Stuart had returned to Scotland, and still, to Elizabeth's intense annoyance, the Treaty of Edinburgh remained unratified. Apart from that, she had on occasion felt a little sorry for Mary, who was constantly harassed both by risings in the northern territories of her kingdom and by the constant opposition of the Scottish reformers.

"Fortunately the Earl of Moray wants to prevent a marriage

between the Scottish queen and a powerful foreign prince," Cecil said. "So in that respect we can count him an ally."

Moray was Mary Stuart's illegitimate half brother, a Protestant, but not an extremist, and Mary, up to now, had been guided by him in most of her important decisions. It seemed to Elizabeth obvious enough that Moray wanted Scotland for himself, and if Mary had not yet realized this she was something of a fool.

"Your position is a difficult one, Cecil," Elizabeth said compassionately. "It amazes me that you should always remain so calm. Even though the marriage negotiations with the archduke are mere pretense, you have been forced to make me seem sincere. For that reason the Protestants have grown to hate you. And now, in order to keep the archduke still dangling, you have the additional task of preventing a marriage between him and Mary Stuart."

Cecil smiled serenely. "My shoulders are broad enough, madam. A secretary of state is always hated by one faction or another."

Elizabeth laughed suddenly. "I have an excellent idea! Let the Queen of Scotland know that our differences of opinion may be smoothed out quite easily if she takes a husband of my choosing. That will hold Philip at bay for a time."

"Whom have you in mind for her, madam?"

"My dear Cecil, I shall offer her my own sweet Robin."

Loving as she did to startle people, it delighted her to see that the usually imperturbable Cecil was at least a little shaken.

"You can hardly be serious, madam. The Queen of Scotland would regard the offer as an insult."

Elizabeth looked at him unblinkingly. Naturally she would never part with Robin, but he had been fretful of late because she had not yet raised him to the peerage. She had held back because Cecil and the majority of her privy councilors were against it, but here now was a perfect excuse.

"I shall raise him to the peerage at once," she said. "That will make him more acceptable. And besides, if Robin marries Mary Stuart, I shall be able to count on him to restrain her. Why, I might even welcome a child of theirs as my heir."

Cecil smiled faintly. "It will be nice for Lord Robert to be raised to the peerage."

"Oh, damn you, Cecil, damn you!" Elizabeth laughed.

Robin was somewhat sulky about the offer, which was duly made, but he was overjoyed by the elaborate investiture at which he was created Earl of Leicester. He even wrote to Mary Stuart private letters of admiration, which were dictated by Elizabeth herself.

Presently Mary Stuart's reply reached Whitehall. In spite of the honor thus done her, she wrote, she was loath to deprive her sister-queen of the ever-present attentions of a friend she so dearly prized.

"Bitch!" Elizabeth raved.

Actually, with Robin raised to the peerage her central purpose had been achieved. It was still necessary, however, to pretend that she might marry the Archduke Charles. So she repeated the offer to Mary and at the same time informed the Spanish ambassador that this proved that she was preparing herself for marriage with the man of King Philip's choice. Once again Mary rejected Robin, upon which Elizabeth offered him for a third time. By now, however, Cecil was suggesting Lord Darnley as an alternative to the new Earl of Leicester.

"Darnley? You must be crazy!"

Young Darnley, like Mary Stuart, was a great-grandchild of Henry VII of England and therefore close to the English throne.

"Such a marriage would strengthen Mary Stuart's claim to my throne," Elizabeth protested warmly.

"Just one more move in the constant game of pretense," Cecil said reassuringly.

Elizabeth realized that she should have recognized the neat little scheme at once. Mary Stuart had refused Robin but would give greater consideration to Darnley, and thus Philip, in his attempt to gain control of Scotland, would be held at bay a little longer.

"I'll have a talk with Darnley," she decided.

Darnley, with his parents, the Earl and Countess of Lennox, was at present in London. Lennox had deserted the Scottish cause soon after Mary's birth. As a result his Scottish estates had been sequestered, and he had been sent into exile.

"Draft out a letter to the Queen of Scotland," Elizabeth commanded Cecil. "Tell her that I should be grateful if she would pardon Lennox and permit him and his family to return to

Scotland. Mention, in passing as it were, that young Darnley is a handsome youth. Say I shall miss him at my court but want to see justice done."

Cecil was looking doubtful now. "Madam, I can see an important weakness in my suggestion. We want the Queen of Scotland to consider Lord Darnley, not actually marry him. But if you offer him in place of the Earl of Leicester, she may agree."

"I realize the possibility, and yet— Cecil, an idea is taking shape in my mind. It needs much thought. In any case, the letter in no way commits me to an offer. However, delay it for a day or so."

Elizabeth wasted no time in commanding Darnley to take supper with her, tête-à-tête, and though the money-saving mood was still upon her, she ordered the preparation of the choicest of dishes and the opening of the best wine in her cellars.

"I have never been so deeply honored," Darnley said, when they were seated at table together.

"You know my fondness for a handsome youth," she told him silkily.

Darnley, scarcely more than eighteen, was becomingly tall and graceful in all his movements. Earlier she had formed the impression that he was lacking in character. She wondered if she had been right and began now to study him with the utmost care. With his beardless face, his almost transparent skin, Darnley's good looks were more feminine than masculine. His eyes were inclined to waver when she held them overlong, and when he laughed, his mouth expressed a sneer rather than honest mirth. She thought that if he were crossed in any way he might scream like a woman. Quickly, and she hoped correctly, she concluded that he could be used to good purpose in Scotland.

Gaining his confidence, she talked lightly of unimportant matters, asking his opinion on this and that, listening attentively to his answers and agreeing with him warmly.

"So rarely do youthful good looks conceal a keen brain," she murmured. "Surely, my dear Darnley, you are destined for greatness."

"That, madam, has been my own firm belief since I was a child."

Elizabeth nodded her approval. "To know what one wants, to understand one's undoubted ability, what a God-given blessing!"

She was quick to notice that wine brought a flush to his cheeks and an insolence to his eyes. She glanced hastily at the pitcher; the wine was disappearing rapidly.

"You were meant to rule."

"That I have always believed."

"Meant, perhaps, even to rule a queen."

He laughed his delight, a tinkling, quite feminine sound.

"Which queen have you in mind?" he asked coyly.

"Oh, no queen in particular. I myself am, of course, much too old for you."

She waited for his gallant, flattering denial.

"True," he agreed, through pursed lips.

She was so taken aback that she had an inclination to pick up the chicken and fling it in his pretty face.

"If I were not an exile from my native land," he went on, "I would think Your Majesty had my cousin of Scotland in mind."

"You would?"

"Mary has a certain comeliness," he said disdainfully. "We would make a handsome couple."

"Ah, but if I were to interest myself in such a match, what would Mary's attitude be?"

"The practice of a little guile would be necessary, certainly."

"Enough of it to convince her that she was making her own choice, yes. A most interesting subject. I wonder whom she will choose when the time comes for her to take a second husband?"

"If she chooses me," Darnley boasted, "I'll be the real power, the real ruler of Scotland, within a week of the marriage."

Elizabeth forced an admiring laugh. "God's precious soul, how you frighten me, Darnley! What a mercy I'm old enough not to fall in love with you!"

She rose with seeming reluctance. Having achieved as much as possible for the moment, she wanted to be rid of him. Besides, it seemed to her that if she permitted the young puppy to remain and drink more wine, he would have to be carried from her presence.

She was at her desk early the next morning, and when Cecil

appeared, she told him that the letter could now be dispatched to Mary Stuart.

It was sent by special courier, and the same courier brought back a sweetly worded reply. Mary Stuart was eager to show good will in all things and gladly gave the Lennox family permission to return to Scotland.

"So far so good," Elizabeth commented.

She summoned Darnley to her presence again, told him the news, and wished him well.

"But if your fancy would lead you to make an illustrious marriage," she warned him, "remember that to speak of my support might deprive you of all hope of success."

Thereafter, through Cecil's spies, she kept in touch with the progress of events at the Scottish court and, as Darnley appeared to be gaining favor with Mary Stuart, her excitement grew apace. A delightful game and not, she was positive, a really dangerous one, for Mary's half brother Moray was showing a definite opposition to such a match.

In a remarkably short time Cecil was able to report that the Queen of Scotland appeared to have fallen in love with Darnley. A stupid creature, for sure! Such poor judgment, such amazing bad taste! Next it was learned that Mary had left Holyrood House for Stirling Castle, intent on enjoying a change of air. She had taken with her only a few attendants, among them the delectable Darnley.

After that events moved rapidly. Mary, Cecil reported, had spent a night in Darnley's room at Stirling Castle. Not only his spy had observed the fact, but the Earl of Moray's as well. Moray was quarreling bitterly with her, but Mary had already issued a proclamation saying that she would marry Lord Darnley.

"I shall now express my open disapproval of the match," Elizabeth decided.

This she did, but before Mary could reply, if indeed she intended to reply, news came of a plot, hatched by Moray, either to murder Darnley or hold him prisoner. The plot failed and Moray, now in open revolt, withdrew from Edinburgh with a large following of rebel lords. He took immediate possession of Stirling Castle, fortified it extensively, and began to gather together an army.

"Splendid!" Elizabeth exulted.

Mary married Darnley well in advance of the announced date, this being an obvious move to prevent Moray from attempting active intervention.

"It was a semisecret ceremony," Cecil informed Elizabeth. "Apparently a papal dispensation arrived one day and the marriage took place the next, at the early hour of five in the morning. The queen's much-favored private secretary, Rizzio, made all the arrangements."

Elizabeth frowned thoughtfully. "I understand that Rizzio is much hated in Scotland. What is Darnley's attitude to the man?"

"He and Rizzio are close friends."

"Then do what you can to make trouble between them."

News soon came that Mary had decided to raise an army and ride at its head against Moray. This news was followed by a letter from her, the long-delayed reply to Elizabeth's openly expressed disapproval of the marriage. She and Darnley, Mary wrote, were now joined together in holy matrimony; her marriage with one so close to the throne of England, she felt sure, would please Elizabeth. It did, indeed it did! But her final sentence was infuriating, for Mary "sincerely and earnestly" begged that Her Majesty of England should meddle no further in the affairs of Scotland.

"Haughty bitch!" Elizabeth gasped.

But her anger soon passed. Most of the meddling on her behalf would now be done unwittingly by Darnley.

Chapter 31

The masked ball which Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had organized at Elizabeth's command was now in full swing. Whitehall had been thrown open to the more important citizens of London while the guests of honor were the lawyers of the Inns of Court. Normally on these occasions Elizabeth loved to mingle freely and unceremoniously with her people, smiling happily, chatting eagerly with this man and that, and spreading royal good will.

But tonight the mood was not upon her, the Tudor scowl came readily to her face and a simmering fit of bad temper had already reduced three of her ladies to tears and one to near-convulsions. The cause of it all was an excruciating bout of toothache.

"A gay and colorful scene," said William Cecil, who was standing at Elizabeth's side. "The Earl of Leicester has excelled himself."

"Indeed he has." Elizabeth glowered. "The need to supply all these people with food and drink will reduce me to bankruptcy."

"The combined guilds of the City have provided the food," Cecil told her unsmilingly, "while the vintners themselves have presented the wine and ale."

Elizabeth almost forgot her toothache. "But how splendid!" She glanced at the musicians who, after a short respite, were now playing the opening bars of her favorite dance, the galliard, and saw at once that there were far more of them than she usually employed. "And who," she demanded, "is paying for the extra musicians?"

"That is a charge on the royal exchequer, Madam."

The tooth, a troublesome molar, stabbed painfully.

"Ridiculous! Robin has certainly failed me there!"

The unsuspecting Leicester, recognizable in spite of his scarlet mask, appeared at that moment. He bowed gracefully.

"Have I your permission, madam, to ask you to join me in the galliard?"

"Certainly not!"

The galliard reminded her that she had more than one reason for being angry with Robin. Yesterday, for instance, when they had been discussing tonight's ball, he had remarked that, but for Mary Stuart's perversity, he would have been dancing the galliard, not at Whitehall, but at Holyrood House. "So you prefer the honeypot to me," she'd challenged him, and a quarrel had immediately developed, during which Robin had admitted a certain disappointment at the collapse of the marriage negotiations. "Ah," she'd mocked, "you had a fancy, you poor fool, to become a sort of king!" and he had replied heatedly, "Better that than a tame, obedient favorite." She looked at him now with all

the anger she had felt then. The thing to do was teach him a lesson, let him see that favorites could fall heavily from grace, and permanently too, if necessary!

"Your Majesty is too tired for so lively a dance?" Robin suggested sweetly.

"Rubbish!"

She glanced furiously about the hall. A party of gentlemen, all of them masked, had just entered. One, taller than the rest, immediately attracted her attention. He moved with the ease and grace of an expert dancer. She pointed him out to Robin.

"Bring him here. Ask his name and present him."

Robin obeyed with a shrug. He engaged the tall one in conversation and brought him to her side. The stranger was younger than Robin, she decided, studying his slender frame, and more stylishly dressed. His white satin doublet, for instance, had a double row of gold buttons down the front, his netherstocks were elaborate indeed, while on his feet he wore the very latest type of French pantofles. He had on a black mask, and beneath it his eyes sparkled appealingly.

"Christopher Hatton," Robin announced.

"Esquire," Hatton added gently.

Robin laughed sarcastically. "Christopher Hatton, *Esquire*."

Elizabeth extended her hand. "A pleasant name—Christopher. However, on an occasion as informal as this, Chris will suffice."

Hatton kissed her hand, gripping it lightly for a moment in a hand almost as slender as her own.

"You have my permission," she said, glancing vindictively at Robin, "to ask me to dance the galliard."

Hatton bowed. "This is a signal honor, Your Majesty."

Elizabeth gave him her arm, and they joined the dancers. His skill exceeded her expectations. He was even more expert than Robin. Moreover, the gaiety of his manner struck a responsive chord in her heart. She began to feel amazingly young, carefree, and reckless.

"My thanks to you, Chris Hatton," she said, as he escorted her back to her ladies. "You quite made me forget my toothache. Now tell me about yourself and your family."

"My family, madam? Country gentlemen, but much decayed." He had an amusing drawl; he spoke disparagingly, but she sus-

pected a certain pride of birth in his voice. "Myself? I practice law."

"Heavens, man, I never knew a lawyer who could dance with your skill."

"It is possible, even in the Inns of Court, to practice a new step assiduously."

"Are you married?" she asked.

"God forbid, madam!"

Elizabeth laughed merrily, but a moment later the troublesome molar caused her to catch her breath sharply.

"The toothache again?" Hatton asked sympathetically. "Have you tried oil of cloves?"

"Why, no. Is it a good remedy?"

"I find it excellent myself."

"This is more than ordinary toothache. The pain extends into my left ear."

"For that, madam, a small boiled onion."

"What a knowledgeable young man you are! You shall treat me at once for both complaints."

She called Robin to her side. "Leicester, go to the kitchens. Procure some oil of cloves and a small boiled onion. Bring them to my apartments."

"The onion to be freshly boiled, my lord, and kept in the water to preserve the heat," Hatton instructed.

Robin departed to the kitchens with very bad grace, and presently, after what seemed an unnecessarily long delay, stamped into the royal presence chamber carrying a small bottle and a steaming copper pan. By this time Elizabeth had caused Hatton to remove his mask and had discovered with keen satisfaction that his handsome features were as pleasant to look upon as Robin's. Perhaps a little more, she decided, as she glanced from him to Leicester. Hatton had a firm jaw and his eyes, she thought, revealed a remarkable strength of character.

"Remain with us, my lord," she commanded. "Chris Hatton will need an assistant physician."

With Robin holding her head, Hatton bade her open her mouth and skillfully poured a little oil of cloves into the hollow tooth.

"It has a soothing effect already," she declared.

Hatton next inserted the onion into her left ear, having cooled it first in the palm of his hand.

"Splendid!" she cried. "But how can I keep it in place?"

Hatton removed the neckband from beneath his beautifully goffered ruff and, after courteously begging her permission, bound it over her head and tied it beneath her chin.

"More resourceful than the average lawyer," Elizabeth said warmly. "We must see you often at court."

"A royal command, my dear Hatton," Robin said icily. "Make sure you obey it."

"No, no," Elizabeth reproved, "merely the request of a grateful woman."

At that moment William Cecil appeared, looking very grave.

"What is it, Cecil?" she asked, when Robin and Hatton had bowed themselves from her presence.

"Murder, no less, madam."

"Murder!"

"A courier has just arrived from Edinburgh. The Scottish queen's private secretary, David Rizzio, has been brutally done to death."

"Did Darnley kill Rizzio?"

"No one can say for certain. Darnley was present when Ruthven and several other lords entered the supper room. He may or may not have joined in the attack. It was noted afterward that his dagger was missing."

"What of Mary Stuart?"

"She was held prisoner in her apartments—apparently Darnley wanted to seize full power—but she escaped and persuaded Darnley, heaven knows how, to accompany her. She is now at Dunbar Castle. The Earl of Bothwell is with her. He, too, had been held prisoner for a time."

Bothwell, Elizabeth reflected, was a lawless border chief with what amounted to a private army at his beck and call. In addition Mary had given him the border command, a command which Darnley had wanted for his father Lennox, and he had ridden with her against Moray.

"I think we can safely predict," Elizabeth said, "that Bothwell will gather an army together and march on Edinburgh. His

success would not be welcome news, but the main thing is that confusion should still reign in Scotland."

Then before she dismissed Cecil, she asked casually, "What do you know of Christopher Hatton?"

Cecil permitted himself his usual faint smile. "Apart from his skill in the application of onions and oil of cloves, Hatton is a remarkably astute lawyer. He makes light of his ability but nonetheless he has a clever brain, a well-balanced outlook, and, best of all, a temper that is deceptively mild.

"In a word, not unlike yourself, my dear Cecil. It may well be that I shall have use for him. The toothache and the earache have completely gone. Most certainly I shall have use for him!"

Chapter 32

"How sick I am of the sound of his name!" Leicester burst out. "Chris Hatton this, Chris Hatton that! We must ask Chris Hatton, we must ask Chris Hatton! Will it rain? Will the sun shine? Ask Chris Hatton! Will the sun halt in its course round the earth? Ask Chris Hatton!"

"The earth revolves round the sun, not the sun round the earth. You know that quite well, my poor Robin."

"If Hatton declared otherwise you would gladly believe it. Do you utter his name in your sleep, I wonder?"

"Why not ask him?" Elizabeth suggested.

"And now, without warning, I find my command of the guard taken from me and given to Hatton!"

"You know my habit. A new captain from time to time, as the mood takes me. I find your jealousy most diverting."

"But Bess, a mere lawyer, insignificant, obscure, better at dancing than practicing law!"

"So kind of you to concede him a good dancer."

"Good enough at all events to dance his way into royal favor!"

"Enough, my lord!" Elizabeth said, dryly. "I sent for you because I feel in need of a change of air. Be good enough, please, to make arrangements for the removal of the court to Greenwich."

At Greenwich she continued to tease Robin by keeping Hatton close at hand. Not only did she dance with him more than anyone else, but from time to time she engaged him in penetrating discussions of both domestic and foreign affairs. She did this in order to test what Cecil had said of him, and before giving him a position of importance in her government.

While the court was still at Greenwich Palace, the Scottish envoy, Sir James Melville, arrived with the news that Mary Stuart had given birth to a male child. By now Mary had been reinstated by the Earl of Bothwell. Darnley appeared to have been forgiven for whatever part he might have taken in the Rizzio murder and for the time being order of a sort seemed to have been restored at the Scottish court.

Melville reached Greenwich when Elizabeth was enjoying an informal after-supper dance, and made his announcement in the hearing of many members of the court. His words were followed by a little hush. The news of the royal baby had been expected daily, yet Elizabeth, bitterly resentful that Mary Stuart should so easily conceive a child, had tried to ignore the pregnancy. She repeated Melville's words dully, and whispered carelessly, "The Queen of Scotland is lighter by a fair son, and I remain a barren stock."

The hush deepened. Elizabeth felt that she had betrayed herself, and that was intolerable. She forced a quick laugh and looked, almost pleadingly, at the nearby Hatton. His response was instant.

"Better that," he murmured, "than to conceive a child by a blackguard like Darnley."

Heartened by this, she was completely in command of herself the next morning, when she granted Melville an official audience. He began by saying that it would give his mistress great joy if the Queen of England would be the baby prince's god-mother.

Melville then begged her to journey to Scotland for the baptismal ceremony, but that was too much. She promised instead to send a proxy and to provide for the ceremony a font of solid gold.

While preparations for the Scottish baptism were going forward, Elizabeth called Parliament together. She did so for no better reason than that, with her income from crown lands and

properties insufficient for her needs, she was once again obliged to ask for supply.

To her annoyance and amazement, the debate ended not in the granting of supply, but in a petition asking her either to marry or name a successor. She immediately instructed Cecil, her spokesman in the House of Commons, to point out that she would perform her own royal duties in her own good time, providing they attended dutifully to theirs.

"Madam," Cecil suggested, after this had been done, "the situation is a delicate one, the more so since we now have two distinct parties in England. One, made up in the main of Catholics, favors the Queen of Scotland; the other, Protestants to a man, is afraid of her. The birth of the Scottish prince has increased the hopes of the Catholics; the Protestants, on the other hand, are in considerable despair lest a Catholic heir should some day ascend the throne."

The House of Lords, alarmed at the rift which was developing between the Commons and the Queen, sent a deputation of twenty peers to wait on Elizabeth for the purpose of humbly begging her to settle the vexed question of the succession.

"It would seem, gentlemen," she told the deputation scathingly, "that you are trying to dig my grave while I am still alive. Nothing of this sort happened in my father's time. He would have quelled you with a look. I myself can only berate you soundly and remind you that parliamentary votes, however many you may pass, are empty breath without the royal assent."

The parliamentary debates came to an end at last, the result being a joint petition from the two Houses. They were all rebels now, the Lords and Commons alike, for Elizabeth was urged once more, in language which seemed to her anything but loyal, to choose a consort or name a successor.

"What is beneath this insolent disobedience?" she asked Hatton. "What do the incompetent devils really want of me?"

"Complete liberty, madam."

"They have liberty enough. Give them more and they'll tie me hand and foot. What do you advise, Chris Hatton?"

"Utter a few noncommittal words, madam, then wait and see."

Elizabeth agreed with alacrity; delaying tactics, whether in respect of an unwanted husband or a rebellious Parliament,

were ever the best. She summoned both Houses before her in the Great Hall and, seated on the throne in her parliamentary robes, assured them that though it would be sufficient for her to live and die a virgin, she had made no secret vow of celibacy.

But Parliament remained unappeased and voted that the Bill of Supply should become a part of a new bill for the settlement of the succession. Scolding them roundly, she refused to accept this, and thereafter other matters were debated with the Bill of Supply placed in abeyance.

"Fine advice you gave me," she complained to Hatton. "Perhaps I should never seek more of you than a dancing lesson."

"Your Majesty being more expert than I," he retorted smoothly, "it is *you* who should give *me* a dancing lesson."

"Flatterer!" she cried in delight. "Well, are you ready to advise me further?"

"The position as I see it, madam, is this: There is always the danger of France and Spain *and* Scotland uniting against England, if England is considered too weak to resist. By England I mean Her Majesty the Queen. And the queen, deprived of a grant from Parliament, would soon be unable to maintain either an army or a navy. Parliament realizes this. Some members even fear that in their new stubbornness they are in danger of cutting their own throats."

"Give me a sharp razor and I'll cut a few throats myself, by God I will!"

Hatton smiled broadly. "Therefore, madam, I suggest a compromise."

"Compromise, compromise? Am I a queen or a lawyer?"

"How much money do you need?"

"Half the amount I demanded," Elizabeth laughed. "You need advise me no further. I know exactly what to do. England, my husband, is being troublesome. I shall therefore offer him a compromise, which is more than I'd ever do with a flesh and blood husband, by God's precious soul it is!"

She summoned thirty members of each House before her and addressed them in honeyed tones. No one was close enough to see that her eyes, sharply contemptuous, belied the softness of her words.

"Gentlemen, I feel for you the same loving affection that I felt in days gone by when I was little more than a prisoner liv-

ing under the shadow of death, and you, in the full sense of the word, were not my people. God forbid that through any action of mine, *or* yours, those ghastly circumstances should return."

"God forbid!" the gathering echoed, as with one voice.

"What more can I say than this?" she went on: "I am ever moved to do all in my power for the well-being of my subjects. Further, gentlemen, money in my subjects' purses is as good as in my own exchequer." This sounded grand and brought forth a murmur of approbation. "Therefore," she continued, "on the understanding that Parliament is willing to grant me an extra subsidy, once I name my successor, I shall be more than content for the time being to accept one half of the sum already requested. You know from experience how good a housekeeper I am, scrimping and saving wherever possible. One half, then, will be a challenge to my ability to make do where any other sovereign would beat her breast in despair."

A vote for the provision of one half of the original sum requested was passed immediately, whereupon Elizabeth wasted no time in dissolving Parliament. She had got the better of them, and not until more money was needed would she dream of calling them together again.

And now, she thought, what next in Scotland?

Chapter 33

"So Hatton was right!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"He actually predicted this shattering catastrophe in Scotland?" Cecil asked in surprise.

"No, he merely suggested that Mary Stuart was in love with the Earl of Bothwell and would certainly overreach herself."

News had just reached Whitehall of the death of Darnley, and everything seemed to point to murder.

"Cecil," Elizabeth asked, "was Bothwell responsible?"

"No one knows, madam."

"Or Mary herself, Bothwell being her agent?"

"I can only say again, no one knows. However, the Earl of Bothwell has been charged by Darnley's father and will stand trial."

Bothwell's trial took place nine weeks after Darnley's death, but with no substantial evidence brought against him, he was acquitted.

Elizabeth next learned that the Scottish Parliament had accepted the verdict of the Bothwell trial and further, at Mary's request, had made Bothwell a present of Dunbar Castle, one of the strongest fortresses in Scotland. Following this, Bothwell's supporters entered into a solemn bond and swore to protect him from his enemies. In the same bond they also declared him to be a worthy husband for the queen.

Elizabeth laughed aloud. So that was how the wind was blowing! Bothwell would surely divorce his wife now, and what a scandal that would cause in Scotland!

His next move, however—for it looked as if Mary was displaying certain scruples—was to take the queen prisoner and carry her off to the castle she had given him.

"I wonder what is happening at Dunbar?" Elizabeth glowered. "Those border chiefs are violent men. The wretched Mary is Bothwell's now by right of capture. Is she impressed, overawed and trembling with desire?"

Mary spent eight days at Dunbar, after which, with Bothwell indeed divorcing his wife, she had returned to Edinburgh, Bothwell leading her into the city, his hand on her horse's bridle. Elizabeth remembered what had happened during the Darnley courtship. Was it the same now? However, whether or not Mary had found herself forced that way, the banns were issued and Mary and Bothwell were married, not in the Catholic church but, wonder of wonders, in the Reformed Church of Scotland.

Meanwhile the Catholic lords in Scotland were itching to rise against Bothwell, and the Protestant lords, gathering at Stirling ostensibly to protect Prince James, were itching to do the same. Bothwell, with Mary no better than his prisoner still, or so it seemed, decided to strike first.

This news alarmed Elizabeth considerably, for she had been told that Bothwell controlled the whole of southern Scotland.

A quick victory would give him control of the entire country, and the danger in that, with Scotland united as never before, was clear. However, it was soon proved that the border chief, clever when it came to making a raid here, another there, was an incompetent fool when it came to real warfare. He suffered a humiliating defeat at Carberry Hill, went into hiding, and left Mary to be dragged back to Edinburgh with the populace crying, "Burn the whore, burn her!" And from Edinburgh she was taken to a castle on the Island of Loch Leven and there held in captivity.

"And the prince, my godson?" Elizabeth asked Cecil.

"The Lords of the Congregation are bent on forcing the queen to abdicate and setting him up as king."

"Let it be known," Elizabeth decided, "that I heartily agree, providing Mary Stuart abdicates of her own free will."

Mary eventually abdicated—it was rumored that she had given birth to a stillborn child at Loch Leven—the little prince was proclaimed James VI of Scotland, and a regency council, headed by the Earl of Moray, came into being. It went without saying that the new king was to be brought up in the Protestant faith.

"I feel sorry for Mary," Elizabeth said somberly, "but she was surely her own worst enemy. However, the main thing is this: the woman who was once Queen of Scotland will give us no more trouble."

"And the wider problem of Scotland itself?" Cecil asked.

"We can keep the Scots quiet by dallying, for years if necessary, with the suggestion that soon I may be willing to accept the little Protestant king as my heir."

"Dallying . . ."

"What else, my dear Cecil, what else?"

Chapter 34

"How many wigs do I now possess, Ashley?"

"No less than sixty, madam."

"And gowns?"

"Close on a thousand."

"Good God, Ashley, we must practice a little economy, or I'll be forced to summon Parliament again."

Elizabeth was dressing for a state visit to the City. She had kept away from it for months because of the pestilence, but Cecil, assuring her that the danger had abated, had urged her to make this visit, saying that because of the recent rising in the northern counties it would hearten the people of London to see their queen moving amongst them again, showing no concern whatever and smiling, as only she knew how to, in good times and bad.

"That damnable Mary Stuart!" she burst out. "How wrong I was when I declared she'd give me no more trouble!"

After less than twelve months in her island prison, the ex-queen of Scotland had succeeded in escaping and gathering an army about her, her aim being to regain the throne which she had abdicated. She had, in other words, made war on her little son, King James. Fortunately she had suffered complete defeat, but instead of trying to escape to France, as might have been expected, she had fled into England. An uninvited guest, and a most unwelcome one, Elizabeth thought resentfully. And the sorry question had been, what to do with her? Leave her free, give her safe conduct to France, keep her under surveillance? An impossible, embarrassing situation. It almost seemed as if the ghost of Darnley had uttered a diabolic curse.

Mary had begun by asking permission to come to London, but Elizabeth, well aware of the hopes which might rise in the breasts of her Catholic subjects, had refused the request. Mary had then been removed farther south from Carlisle to Bolton Castle in Yorkshire, and there denied nothing but her liberty.

Once again she had asked permission to come to London. This time Elizabeth declared that she could not receive her until she had been declared innocent of any hand in Darnley's murder. Mary had immediately demanded an open inquiry and Elizabeth had agreed that one should take place before a bench of royal commissioners. The result, as Elizabeth had expected, was that nothing could be proved to Mary's detriment. That was excellent, really; Mary was neither guilty nor guilt-

less. In a way it was an open verdict, and a little more time had been gained.

Thereafter, with Elizabeth excommunicated by the Pope (which she considered ridiculous, since she was not a Catholic), there had been a confusion of plots and counterplots, and a dangerous intrigue on the part of the Duke of Norfolk. He represented the conservative section of English gentry, but was also in close alliance with the wealthy merchants who feared that their lucrative trade with the Netherlands would be ruined if England came to blows with Spain in that area. Cecil had been drawn temporarily to such a move and Norfolk had opposed him. But worse, Norfolk had been found to be in secret communication with Mary Stuart and had actually dared to urge Elizabeth to name Mary her heir. There had been only one thing for it, Norfolk's arrest and incarceration in the Tower.

Shortly after that, the Earl of Northumberland and the Earl of Westmoreland, both of them Catholics, had risen against the crown and entered Durham with six thousand men. They had proclaimed the restoration of the old faith, yet made no open reference to Mary Stuart. This northern rebellion had been of short duration, and after Mary had been removed secretly to Coventry, the rebels had been scattered.

"Your Majesty . . ."

Elizabeth looked up. Hatton had entered, an inspiring sight in full armor, his hand resting lightly on the jeweled hilt of the sword which she had given him in a moment of generosity.

"The court is now assembled, madam. The procession awaits Your Majesty's pleasure."

Elizabeth entered the City in the chariot which she had used for her Procession of Recognition twelve years ago. Twelve years on the throne, she thought—impossible! She was now thirty-seven; that was even more impossible. She glanced quickly at the Earl of Leicester, still Master of the Horse, who rode on her right. Robin was the same age, of course, and by heaven, he looked even older. Too much rich food, too much good wine, but happily not too much power. He had put on weight, his face was fuller. He was almost bloated. His earlier good looks were certainly fading. She turned from him to Hatton, who rode on her left. A much more pleasing sight

—straight, slim, his cheeks rosy in the crisp January air. The handsomest man in England!

Elizabeth's welcome in the City equaled that given her at the Procession of Recognition. The streets were hung with bunting and the people who lined them cheered hoarsely. London was predominantly Protestant, and London, delivered twelve years ago from religious persecution, had now been saved from the threat of its return. Twelve years, Elizabeth thought—ridiculous! Twelve months at the most! She certainly felt no more than twelve months older.

The tour of the City brought her at last to the newly completed bourse. Sir Thomas Gresham, a wealthy merchant and an admirable philanthropist, had built it at his own expense. He deplored the fact, he had told Elizabeth, that the London merchants, with no central building of their own, still conducted business in the aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral. And so, with Her Majesty's gracious permission, this new, quite handsome bourse had been erected. Sir Thomas himself assisted her now from the chariot and conducted her on an inspection of the building. The ground floor consisted of a series of walks for the merchants; there were shops above, and below, in the vaults, was storage space for every kind of merchandise.

"You have spent a lot of money," Elizabeth said.

"Madam, twelve years ago you restored the coinage to its true value, thus in your wisdom driving out bad money with good money; whereas earlier, bad money had been permitted to drive out the good."

"And so, Sir Thomas, we now have this fine new bourse, and here, I pray, good money will continue to drive out bad money. This surely calls for royal patronage."

She motioned Robin to her side.

"Summon the heralds, my lord. I have a royal proclamation to make. The word bourse is too ordinary a name for so magnificent a building. Henceforth it shall be known as the Royal Exchange."

The trumpets sounded and the proclamation was issued. Word of it spread quickly through the City, so that Elizabeth's return to Whitehall was a progress attended by even greater public acclamation.

"The people of London," William Cecil remarked after-

ward, "regard it as a sign that English trade will flourish in spite of the recent threat of invasion."

"Just as I intended," Elizabeth told him warmly.

"Nevertheless," Cecil went on soberly, "the thing we have struggled for twelve years to avert is still a serious threat to our national security. The international situation remains unchanged. France is afraid of an Anglo-Spanish alliance, Spain is afraid of an Anglo-French alliance, and we ourselves are afraid of a Franco-Spanish alliance."

Twelve years, Elizabeth was thinking. Why was everybody conspiring today to force upon her the unwelcome fact that she was thirty-seven years old? She stared resentfully at Cecil.

"Are you finding the weight of your years too great a burden?"

"Why, no, madam."

"Liar! You have a weary look at times and your gout is more troublesome than ever. Just look at your hands today! So crippled you can scarcely hold a pen."

"Fortunately, madam, gout has never been known to attack the brain."

Changing the subject, Cecil touched upon the problem of Mary Stuart, one of whose letters to the King of Spain had been intercepted and copied. It had been written in code, but the code, a simple one, had been easily broken.

"God's precious soul," Elizabeth raged, "for all the strict watch kept upon her, Mary Stuart is still able to plot against me! But why does she turn to Philip, not to France?"

"There is evidence that she sought aid first of France, but France, as Your Majesty knows, is now eager for you to marry the Duke of Anjou."

"Yes, my dear Cecil, on the one hand let us keep the new suitor, Anjou, dangling; on the other—my God, what a lengthy courtship!—the Archduke Charles."

Cecil coughed slightly. "Your Majesty, I have news of the archduke. He has grown tired of waiting and has married a Bavarian princess."

Shaken by fury, Elizabeth stared at the secretary in silence.

"Spurned!" she broke out at last. "Elizabeth Tudor spurned!"

"The main point is this," Cecil interrupted hastily: "we can no longer hold King Philip at bay by continuing to dangle

the archduke with half promises of marriage. In any case he has been badly provoked in another matter."

Elizabeth chuckled. "Ah yes, all that Spanish gold now lying in the Tower. Such a goodly sum, four million crowns!"

King Philip had dispatched the money by sea in six ships, for the Netherlands where his troops, their pay in arrears, were growing restive. Attacked by Channel pirates, the ships had put into an English port. Elizabeth had been tempted to hold them—after all, Philip had promised aid to the northern rebels—but sober reflection had shown her that such an act would be tantamount to a declaration of war. The money, however, had been a greater temptation and so, on the pretext of holding it safe, for pirates often sailed right into port, she had placed it in the Tower.

"Philip should thank me for having his interests so much at heart," she'd laughed.

Philip had of course done nothing of the kind. A protest through his ambassador had been followed by a Spanish attack on John Hawkins' small trading fleet when Hawkins was returning from the Indies. Hawkins was making a habit of kidnapping Negroes on the Guinea Coast, sailing them across the Atlantic and selling them in the West Indies. A most lucrative enterprise, as Elizabeth well knew, for she had invested money in it and had gained sixty pounds on every hundred. However, the Spanish attack had caused Hawkins heavy losses in ships and men; he had escaped with only two vessels, his own and a smaller one commanded by his cousin, the young Francis Drake.

"The Spanish gold most certainly remains in safekeeping in the Tower," Elizabeth had cried indignantly.

But the Spanish ambassador, a new one and something of a hothead, had refused to believe the "safekeeping" plea and had advised the Duke of Alva, Philip's commander in the Netherlands, to seize and hold any English ships that might be resting in the ports there. Alva had done so at once.

"Ah!" Elizabeth had cried happily, "now I can retaliate in kind. Philip has used me harshly, playing the pirate, while up to now all *I* have done is make myself the guardian of his money."

Retaliating in kind had meant the apprehension of all Spanish-controlled shipping in English ports, but there had still remained the ticklish question of the gold in the Tower. Fortunately Hatton discovered through legal channels that Philip had actually borrowed the money from Italian bankers. Therefore the money wasn't really his. Elizabeth, always in need of money, announced she would keep it for herself and write to the Italian bankers concerning interest rates.

"How many years will it take to get the matter straightened out?" she asked Cecil now.

"Enough for Your Majesty's purpose."

He then returned to the problem of Mary Stuart, saying, "Her continued presence in England is a constant threat to peace at home."

"Have you Norfolk in mind?"

"Yes, madam. Proof is not yet forthcoming, but I am convinced that he would marry her if he could."

"Proof will never be ours," Elizabeth said thoughtfully, "while he remains in the Tower. I think the time has come to give him enough rope with which to hang himself. He shall be released at once and a close watch kept on all his activities. If he behaves himself, so much the better; if not, so much the worse—for him. Do you agree?"

Cecil sighed wearily. "Yes," he said, "yes . . ."

Elizabeth looked at him not unkindly. "You *are* feeling the weight of your years, Cecil. I have a mind to relieve you of some of your duties. Good God, man, far too much work has been pressed upon you since my accession. I shall raise you to the peerage. Yes, yes, I know, that will deprive me of a valued spokesman in the Commons, but it will give me a better one in the Lords. Besides, I'll find another secretary of state and make you lord high treasurer."

"The highest appointment in the land!" Cecil gasped.

"You deserve it! And with less work on your hands you'll be in a better position to deal with Mary Stuart. Are you grateful, Cecil?"

"More than grateful, madam. But . . . a new secretary of state?"

"Ah, you think I prefer Hatton. Be good enough, please, to name your own successor."

"Sir Thomas Smith, perhaps?"

"A good enough choice. You have trained him well. Nevertheless, a stopgap at the most. The promise shown by your younger son, Robert, is remarkable. The position shall be his, one of these days."

"You overwhelm me, madam," Cecil said emotionally.

"Now what of Hatton? Do you still hold a high opinion of him?"

"I do indeed. The office of lord chancellor, perhaps?"

"Well, yes, but not immediately. I want more proof of his ability, first. Meanwhile I'll give him a knighthood and make him my literary secretary. That will bring him into very close contact with me and will make my sweet Robin sulk for weeks and weeks." She laughed maliciously. "Yes, by God, for weeks and weeks!"

Chapter 35

"Open a little wider, if you please, madam."

Elizabeth forced her lower jaw as far down as she could, and Sir Christopher Hatton filled the hollow tooth with oil of cloves. Then William Cecil, now Barron Burghley, having waited patiently at the window, approached with the sheaf of papers he had been studying carefully.

"What progress have you made?" Elizabeth asked, holding her jaw tenderly in the palm of her hand.

"Our inquiries are necessarily slow, madam, but this much I can say: the plot is undoubtedly one of the cleverest it has ever been my task to attempt to expose and circumvent."

"And who is the master mind? Not Norfolk, surely!"

"No, madam. Norfolk is only a pawn in the game; the ringleader is Roberto Ridolfi di Pagnozzo."

Ridolfi, Elizabeth knew, was a Florentine banker who had

been living in London for some years. His real business, as Cecil had long ago discovered, was not banking, but spying. Ridolfi, in short, was a secret agent employed by Rome.

"Would it not be better, my lord," Hatton asked deferentially, "to arrest Ridolfi at once?"

Cecil shook his head. "The man is more use to us at liberty. In any case he is now in Brussels, conferring with the Duke of Alva. Spain is deeply concerned in the plot. I expect daily a report from my agent in Brussels. Once the Spanish side of the plot is known to us, the hope of complete exposure, I trust, will be realized. Meanwhile at home inquiries are continuing on every hand."

"What have you discovered about Norfolk?" Elizabeth asked.

"As you well know when he was released from the Tower he gave his word never to communicate again with the ex-Queen of Scotland. He broke his pledge and wrote to her, sending the letter by a servant who has actually been in my employment for some time. Norfolk asked for a secret meeting. He said there were things to be discussed which could not be put in a letter."

"Has a secret meeting taken place?"

"The Duke of Norfolk is known to have visited the district. The ex-queen was out riding at the time. I have no proof, but I feel sure that they met."

"Have him arrested again and lodged in the Tower," Elizabeth decided. "A second stay in the Tower, followed by release and pardon, should make him all the more daring."

Expressing himself well satisfied with this decision, Cecil withdrew, and Elizabeth asked Hatton to give her an account of the talk he had had the day before with the French ambassador.

"It was something of a fencing match," Hatton laughed. "However, I was able to gain a fuller understanding of conditions in France. That country, with the Catholics on the one hand, the Huguenots on the other, is shockingly torn by religious and political dissension. And the Guise family, in strong opposition to the queen mother, is hoping to bring about a marriage between the Duke of Anjou and the ex-Queen of Scotland."

"Ridiculous! Mary Stuart is safely held in England."

"A proxy marriage, madam, followed by Anjou leading an army into Scotland. If successful there, he would advance into England. If successful here, he and his wife would rule both Scotland and England. The queen mother, Catherine de Medici, knows of this scheme and if it should succeed, she fears her own influence in France would be shattered. Hence her personal eagerness to bring about a marriage between Anjou and Your Majesty."

Elizabeth found herself shaking with anger. "Is Ridolfi also connected with the Guise plot?"

"No, madam. King Philip might like to see Mary Stuart on the throne of England, but he does not want her placed there by the Guises."

"Nevertheless, the threat is a serious one, and to counter it I must pretend, as never before, an earnest interest in Anjou."

"Always remembering, madam, that the queen mother is herself in deadly earnest."

Elizabeth smiled happily. "That, for sure, will give me the upper hand. Well, my dear Chris, what next?"

"The French ambassador craves the honor of a private audience. His purpose, I suspect, is to court you on Anjou's behalf."

Anticipating a stimulating half hour, and arrayed in a white gown, Elizabeth received the ambassador, Monsieur la Mothe de Fenelon, that afternoon. Middle-aged but still slim, he wore a suit of soft buff-colored leather, the doublet cunningly pinked, the venetians becomingly plain. His eyes, set in a narrow face, were large, dark, and soulful. From the outset he paid court with such delicious flattery that Elizabeth, fascinated by the way his eyes rolled, was quite carried away. Not, however, to the extent of committing herself to Anjou. Week by week she gave him further audiences and sent messages of good will to Catherine de Medici and affectionate greetings to Anjou.

Meanwhile Cecil was able to place before her a little more information concerning the Ridolfi plot. Ridolfi, still abroad, had gained King Philip's support. The Duke of Alva was

ready, when the time to strike was decided upon, to lead an army across the Channel.

"But with this reservation," Cecil added: "a rising in England must take place first. King Philip insists upon that."

"The rising to be led by Norfolk?"

"One can only assume so, madam."

"Let him be released a second time," Elizabeth decided. "He can plot no mischief while he remains in the Tower."

Events moved swiftly after Norfolk's release. A young courier, making a secret attempt to reach Mary Stuart, was intercepted. A letter he carried gave additional proof of the Duke of Alva's part in the plot, and after a brief acquaintance with the rack, the courier told all he knew. Norfolk was to lead a rising and march on London. Then, after assassinating Elizabeth, he would set Mary Stuart at liberty and marry her. The Spanish ambassador was a party to the plot, and so was the Bishop of Ross, the representative in London of the Scottish Mary Stuart party.

Norfolk was arrested, tried, and condemned to death. So was the Earl of Northumberland who, after his own earlier rising, had been in hiding in Scotland. There were other arrests, other executions, and while the Bishop of Ross was spared—Elizabeth berated him herself and frightened him as never a man had been frightened before—the Spanish ambassador was given three days to leave England.

"And what of Mary Stuart?" was the question everybody asked.

Parliament met and both Houses petitioned the queen to bring her to trial, but after much thought, Elizabeth rejected the petition. Though far more than a mere pawn in the game, Mary had not committed herself irrevocably. To sign her death warrant might precipitate a Spanish invasion. Elizabeth, therefore, contented herself with the reduction of Mary's household and the strengthening of the guard at Tutbury, where the Scottish queen was now imprisoned. If in some future plot she *did* commit herself irrevocably, that would be a very different matter.

While this question was being debated, La Mothe de Fenelon pressed Elizabeth for a decision. Anjou was young and ardent,

he suggested, and youth could not be kept waiting too long. Elizabeth had now decided that the marriage negotiations could be safely broken off. Not even the Guises, with the failure of the Ridolfi plot a warning to all intriguers, would risk open action on Mary's behalf. And besides, the young man himself, as one of Cecil's agents had discovered, was by no means as ardent as De Fenelon continued to insist.

"Anjou," she told De Fenelon icily, "has made a number of uncomplimentary remarks about me."

Showing instant alarm, De Fenelon protested that the gallant young prince had surely been maliciously misquoted by his enemies.

"Rubbish!" Elizabeth snapped. "He declared in the presence of witnesses that he could never marry a woman of easy virtue. And so," she concluded sweetly, "much as it breaks my heart to tell you this, monsieur, I cannot, on my honor, continue these marriage negotiations. An official communication to that effect will be delivered into your hands in the very near future. You may withdraw, monsieur."

But Elizabeth Tudor, she thought, was still in the marriage market. Who next, she wondered, would enter the lists?

VI. Alençon

Chapter 36

"Hatton is much too slow," the Earl of Leicester complained. "Darkness will be upon us even before your own tent is set up."

"Slow he may be, yet he possesses a meticulous thoroughness," Elizabeth pointed out. "Whereas you, my poor Robin, dash at things like a bull at a gate. Attention to detail is more important than noisy half measures. The last time you were in charge of a progress, the tent fell down on me during the night."

Elizabeth was returning now from a royal progress to Oxford, and rather than press forward hurriedly on the last lap to London, she had decided to camp for the night on the outskirts of a village.

"That tent was meant to fall on you," Robin chuckled. "You enjoyed the joke as much as I did, Bess."

The chuckle was a boyish echo of Robin's earlier years, and it was this very chuckle that had prompted her to restore him to complete favor. Not, of course, that he had succeeded in ousting Hatton; Chris was too valuable a servant and friend to be deposed at the whim of the jealous Robin.

"You ought to have more dignity," she teased. "Practical jokes are for boys and youths, not an old codger like you."

"Dear Bess," Robin laughed, "I am, remember, an hour younger than yourself."

That, of course, was a tactless remark, but being in a happy mood, as she always was when making a royal progress, Elizabeth dismissed it with the slightest of frowns. Then with easy informality she joined Hatton in his task of pitching camp for

the night. Since all were hungry, his first concern had been to set up the camp kitchens where the cooks were now busily at work.

"But remember my rigid rule," she admonished them lightly. "Feed the starving court with all the economy at your command. No waste, you wretches, no wastel!"

Presently, with every tent secured, and the banners of the various courtiers lifting gently in the evening breeze, she surveyed the scene with satisfaction. It was an enormous, sprawling encampment, for with the exception of Cecil, who was ill in London, she had brought the whole court with her. The cost of the progress was somewhat frightening, but for once, she refused to dwell upon it.

"Feed the musicians first, then set them to work," she instructed Hatton.

Moving on to her own tent, the ropes of which she tested carefully, she found the French ambassador, who had accompanied the progress, waiting to speak with her.

"Ah, Monsieur de Fenelon, I trust you are comfortably quartered."

He smiled, rather superciliously, she thought, and assured her that he was.

"This," she laughed, "is your first experience of royal informality. Do you find it palatable?"

"Your Majesty is renowned for informality, even when holding court at Whitehall, but to hold court in a *tent*—"

"And when the tent is likely to collapse on one's head," Elizabeth chuckled, "some credence might be given to the unfortunate Anjou's even more unfortunate remark about my ease of virtue."

Instead of showing the embarrassment she expected, De Fenelon smiled blandly. "Ah, those so terrible, misquoted words, what trouble they caused the young prince."

"Trouble?"

"Alençon, for example, all but challenged Anjou to a duel."

"Well, imagine that!"

"A gallant young man, the dear Alençon," De Fenelon murmured, innocently, "ready, as ever, to spring to Your Majesty's defence."

The Duke of Alençon was Anjou's younger brother, and this was not the first time since the collapse of the Anjou marriage negotiations that De Fenelon had spoken of him. Alençon, needless to say, was as yet unmarried.

Elizabeth tapped De Fenelon lightly with her riding whip. "How delightful that I should have been the innocent cause of a near duel between Alençon and Anjou. And what a mighty little man he must be, this Alençon. Surely he has yet to cut his milk teeth."

"Your Majesty will have your little joke," De Fenelon chortled.

"I scarcely intended to make a joke, monsieur. But thank the prince himself, I do beseech you, for springing, as you say, to my defense. What weapons were to have been used? Was it to have been a biting match?"

She spared him the need of answering by sending for Hatton.

"What keeps the musicians?" she demanded. "Surely they have eaten their fill by now!"

On returning to Whitehall the next morning she found Cecil waiting for an audience. He had recovered from his illness, a feverish cold and not, as had been feared, the plague, but was still as crippled as ever by gout. Elizabeth missed having him at the palace. His apartments had been vacated on his elevation to the peerage, and though she could summon his successor at a moment's notice, it wasn't quite the same. Instead she turned to Hatton and quite often, when requiring Cecil's advice, she used Hatton as an intermediary.

"I should like to whisper one word in Your Majesty's ear," Cecil said now. "The word, or rather the name, madam, is . . . Alençon."

"By God, I might have expected it!" she cried, and gave him an account of her last conversation with De Fenelon.

"Monsieur de Fenelon has not yet received official instructions," Cecil went on, "but can be expected to do so any day now. Meanwhile Walsingham has warned us in advance."

Walsingham, Elizabeth's present ambassador in France, was also Cecil's second in command of the now widely operating spy system which Cecil had established and used so successfully in the past.

"Why is Catherine de Medici so eager for an alliance with England?" Elizabeth demanded. "No, wait! I think I know the answer. Peace of a sort, religious and political, has now been restored in France. This places France in a position to attack the Spanish in the Netherlands, especially since the Netherlands is in revolt against Spanish domination. Catherine probably reasons that success there would be easier if England and Spain are kept widely apart, and the story of my proposed marriage with Prince Rudolph must have alarmed her."

Actually the Prince Rudolph negotiations had been undertaken merely to alarm France. For Rudolph was another of Philip of Spain's many cousins, and though the Emperor of Germany had suggested the match, it was clear that Philip was indeed behind the move.

"And now," Elizabeth added, "we must put Catherine's mind temporarily at rest, take up Alençon in Rudolph's place and so do our best to alarm King Philip."

Cecil nodded. "Always remembering that with civil war raging in Scotland, France must be kept from interfering there."

Elizabeth sighed angrily. "And Spain as well."

"Spain is too harassed at present in the Netherlands."

The civil war in Scotland was a side issue, Elizabeth reflected, and dangerous only if those Scottish lords who favored Mary Stuart's restoration got the upper hand. Two Scottish regents, Moray and his successor, Lennox, had been murdered, and though Moray was a sorry loss to English diplomacy, it looked as if the present regent, Marr, was strong enough to deprive Mary of any hopes she might still entertain.

Elizabeth laughed lightly: "And now poor De Fenelon must begin courting me all over again. I shall of course enjoy it, De Fenelon being such an amusing fellow, but Cecil, when in heaven's name will I be free of these idiotic caperings?"

"Marriage itself would free you, madam."

"Oh, damn you, Cecil! You know as well as I do that I must remain forever single in an effort to maintain abroad a balance of power favorable to my own country."

"Your Majesty must be sorely tried at times," Cecil said sympathetically.

"By God I am!"

Not until she had passed the age of childbearing, she thought somberly, would complete freedom be hers. They would cease to pester her then.

She laughed harshly. "And so, Cecil, into the marriage market again, if ever I've really been out of it!"

When she received De Fenelon, privately a few days later, he began by saying that the Duke of Alençon, in one important respect, would be more acceptable to England than his brother the Duke of Anjou.

"In a word, madam, Alençon is considerably more broad-minded."

Elizabeth laughed briefly. "I had the impression, monsieur, that Anjou was more than broad-minded when it came to the telling of an unclean story."

De Fenelon's Adam's apple quivered up and down in his throat. "Your Majesty, I was referring to religious matters. Alençon, for example, is by no means as papistical as Anjou."

"But my interest, to begin with, naturally lies in his personal appearance."

"Does Your Majesty like a man to have black hair, thick black hair, and entrancingly curly?"

"Over the whole of his body, you mean?"

"I can vouch for at least a nice growth on his chest."

"On the chest or elsewhere, monsieur, I prefer my own color."

"Ah, but red hair wedded to black hair invariably produces red hair! The strength of character as well as the beauty bestowed by red hair is ever predominant."

"An excellent effort at praising Alençon and flattering me. I congratulate you, monsieur. However, we leap ahead. One generally discusses marriage before contemplating the possibility of children. How does Alençon wear his beautiful black hair? Not too long, I hope?"

"Madam, he wears it short and brushes it well up from his forehead—a most intelligent forehead—thus lengthening the perfect oval of his face."

"A head the shape of a duck egg, to be sure!"

"No, no, madam, I *do* protest!"

"How tall is he?"

De Fenelon smiled cunningly. "It is quite some time since last I saw him. He must have grown an inch or so by now."

"As tall as I am? A husband shorter would make me feel ridiculous."

"Alençon is young enough for the growth to continue."

"You force me to conclude, monsieur, that the poor boy is short in stature."

"Ah, but so very well set, a most commanding appearance."

"At my court," Elizabeth said crisply, "I alone have a commanding appearance."

She rose. "We seem to have made a little progress. I'll dwell at length on all you have told me. Meanwhile, more important at present than marriage is the discussion of a treaty of friendship between your country and mine. Leave me to dream hopefully about Alençon and see that you confer with Lord Burghley. Friendship first, that I insist upon."

This was a point which Cecil had been careful to stress. Her task, clearly, was to work toward such a treaty by pretending an increasing interest in Alençon, after which, with a pact signed and sealed, the old delaying tactics in which she was so well versed, could be brought into play again.

With the initial discussions completed by Cecil and De Fenelon, a special envoy was sent to France to exchange further views and, if possible, draft out a treaty. Following this, and with the discussion in France proceeding amicably, De Fenelon renewed his attack by saying that Alençon was anxious to visit London and plead his cause in person.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I have grown so used to being courted by you, monsieur, that Alençon himself, still obviously inexperienced, might wreck his own chances. Indeed, things have come to such a pass that if I *did* marry him, whose head do you think I would expect to see on the pillow the next morning? Yours, for sure, monsieur!"

"Your Majesty overwhelms me," De Fenelon gasped.

In France the discussion reached a satisfactory conclusion more rapidly than Elizabeth had expected and, to her delight, no one had thought of insisting on the insertion of a marriage clause. The treaty draft, needing only ratification, was signed at Blois. One important clause was that Henry of Navarre, the

Huguenot leader, should marry Margaret of Valois, sister of the King of France; another was that France and England, unofficially, should give aid to the Netherlands, while the Protestant privateers, supported by both countries, should be given shelter when necessary in French and English ports.

"And now," Cecil said wryly, "Your Majesty has the unenviable task of discouraging the Duke of Alençon, yet at the same time keeping him dangling."

Meanwhile Elizabeth had received from her special envoy in France a full description of the prospective bridegroom. His age, never clearly stated before, was seventeen. He had shown no sign of growth during the past year. The top of his head was estimated to reach no higher than Elizabeth's chin. He had beautiful curly black hair, that was true, but his nose was over-large, and his cheeks were pitted by the ravages of smallpox.

"He sounds revolting," Elizabeth shuddered.

Later, when the treaty had been ratified, De Fenelon hurried to the attack once more and presented a recent portrait. As in the case of the portrait of the Archduke Charles, the artist had obviously been overzealous with his brush.

"I see no sign of the smallpox scars," Elizabeth commented, peering closely at the canvas.

"Your Majesty sees him as he was before the illness, and as he will be again before he comes to England."

"A miracle having been performed in the meantime?"

"Indeed, indeed! A miracle of surgery. The queen mother, anxious to please Your Majesty, has engaged the services of a most skillful surgeon. The scars will be removed."

"Leaving others, and larger ones, no doubt."

"The queen mother offers a guarantee to the contrary."

Elizabeth smiled and looked again at the portrait. "Head and shoulders only. Is Alençon knock-kneed?"

"Your Majesty—I"

"Bowlegged, then?"

"Madam, his legs are straight and shapely."

"But not long enough. I have in my possession an accurate description, monsieur."

De Fenelon threw up his hands in despair, yet after a moment's thought, a smile of triumph crossed his face.

"Your Majesty is naturally well acquainted with ancient history—"

"Naturally! I have read more history than any other woman in the world."

"Your Majesty will then agree that Charlemagne was a magnificent specimen of a man."

"Good God, monsieur, are you presuming to compare this puny boy with Charlemagne?"

De Fenelon shook his head. "I merely had in mind Charlemagne's father, known to history as—"

"As Pepin the Short," Elizabeth interrupted quickly. "Pepin was so short that the top of his head scarcely reached his wife's girdle. I see your drift, you wretch, I see it clearly!"

De Fenelon bowed.

"Spare me further embarrassment," she added primly, "by withdrawing from my presence. Later, should I feel capable of meeting your eye without blushing, we shall resume our negotiations."

Chapter 37

"A splendid occupation for a wet afternoon," Hatton remarked, smiling at Elizabeth from his place at the other side of the desk.

She nodded her agreement. "My Greek has long been in need of a little brushing up."

For the past hour Elizabeth had been translating into English passages of a Greek tragedy, with Hatton taking down her dictated word. She always found tranquillity and a quiet satisfaction when working thus with him, the more so since they shared the same literary interests. He had once remarked that when jointly occupied like this they became, as it were, twin souls. A most daring thing to say, but the words had pleased rather than annoyed her.

"Did you ever have a mistress?" she asked him suddenly.

"Before I came to court, yes," he admitted, "but when Your

Majesty smiled upon me I dedicated myself to the service of the virgin queen."

"Would you take a mistress again if I married?"

Hatton shook his head decisively. "No, madam. I know that if ever you marry, marriage will be a thing of state, something set quite apart from your real self."

Her real self! If only he knew!

"We waste time in idle chatter," she said abruptly. "Read out the last sentence I gave you."

They were at Kenilworth Castle, the Earl of Leicester's magnificent seat in Warwickshire. Elizabeth had been here a week already and planned to remain another two weeks. The cost of entertaining her and the whole court, she thought, would surely reduce poor Robin to bankruptcy. Still, he had many trading monopolies, and meanwhile if he needed money, she would gladly make him a loan and at a moderate rate of interest, too. After all, that would be the least she could do to show her gratitude, for no queen had ever before been entertained so lavishly.

There was a tap at the door and Robin himself entered the study which he had repaneled and refurnished for her own exclusive use during her stay at Kenilworth.

"Monsieur de Fenelon has just arrived from London and begs the privilege of an audience," he announced.

"Does he indeed!" she laughed.

She had brought most of the foreign ambassadors with her to Kenilworth, but to teach De Fenelon a lesson and delay the Alençon negotiations still further, she had pointedly refrained from inviting him.

"Let him wait," she decided.

Later in the afternoon she learned that De Fenelon had brought with him a special envoy from the French court, a Monsieur la Mole.

Elizabeth wasted no further time in receiving De Fenelon and the special envoy. La Mole, however, was a disappointment. He turned out to be a serious-minded young man with an unpleasant habit of coming abruptly to the point, and the point was that the King of France, under pressure from the Pope, wanted to set aside, in the Treaty of Blois, the clause which

promised help to the Netherlands. It was left to De Fenelon to continue the negotiations on a lighter note, but even so, he was obliged to reiterate the same unacceptable point.

"It would seem," Elizabeth told him with considerable asperity, "that France is bent on making the marriage negotiations difficult, if not impossible. Well, what of it, monsieur? Alençon is much too young for me."

"He will get older, given time," was all De Fenelon could say. Elizabeth did some quick arithmetic.

"I myself have the reputation of agelessness, but in the course of time I shall attain the physical age of a hundred. By then Alençon, if not completely dissipated, will be seventy-nine. The difference, I concede, will not matter in the least, then."

De Fenelon laughed uncertainly, and before he could comment, Elizabeth seized the opportunity to delay the negotiations by advancing what she knew to be an impossible condition.

"I could only accept Alençon," she said airily, "youth, smallness of stature, smallpox scars and whatever other defects he may possess, on the understanding that Calais be returned to England."

De Fenelon sent an immediate courier to France, and life at Kenilworth, with hunting parties during the day and fireworks displays and dancing at night, went merrily forward. When at last De Fenelon stood before her again, she wondered if she had gone too far, if indeed the additional bait of Calais was to be offered. Soon, however, she realized that De Fenelon was playing her own game. Nothing definite was said, but the hints were broad enough. As for Calais, that was recognized as one of Her Majesty's little jokes. She was furious, but well aware of the need to prolong the negotiations.

"I am not unwilling," she said, "to adopt the earlier suggestion that Alençon should visit England."

"Alas, madam," De Fenelon sighed, "a French prince can hardly be sent, as it were, on approval."

"Ah, you fear the sight of him might shock me too deeply. What you want is to trap me into a proxy marriage."

"No indeed, madam. It is a matter of national dignity, that and no more."

Elizabeth refused to melt. "I am determined to marry, and

soon, and not necessarily a French prince. Good God, monsieur, have I not waited long enough? Let Alençon come to England at once before I look elsewhere."

De Fenelon bowed. "Your Majesty's request shall be conveyed to the queen mother."

Elizabeth summoned Cecil at once and asked him if he knew of any valid reason for this sudden and quite extraordinary change of attitude on the part of France.

"The Huguenots," Cecil said. "They are the queen mother's reason. Their power in France has increased since the end of the civil wars. If France and England signed a marriage treaty at this stage, they might gain even more power. The queen mother, I feel sure, still wants a marriage treaty, but not an immediate one. There are signs that she will try first to limit the growing power of the Huguenots."

Elizabeth was still at Kenilworth when horrifying dispatches arrived from Walsingham. The Catholics had gained the upper hand. Coligny and other leading Huguenots had been murdered. The massacre had started at dawn on St. Bartholomew's Day, and soon the mob had taken control. Then either with or without Catherine de Medici's instigation, mass murder had followed. Huguenots, high-born and lowly alike, had been dragged from their beds, killed, and dismembered. So, too, had their wives and children, even their cats and dogs. The streets of Paris were running with blood; the river Seine was all but blocked with bodies.

Frozen with horror, Elizabeth passed Walsingham's dispatch to Cecil, who read it aloud with all the courtiers crowding about him. Elizabeth at last broke the silence which had followed his words.

"Where is De Fenelon?"

"He returned to London, madam."

"Have him placed under open arrest. Send a courier to the King of France—no! Send him to the woman who controls the king, Catherine de Medici. Tell her that De Fenelon remains under arrest until she gives me proof of my own ambassador's safety. This is a blow directed against me as much as any French Protestant."

Elizabeth looked round at the still silent courtiers.

"My God, gentlemen, this I know is a political massacre, but it is too horrible to think about."

She decided at once to return to London, and while resting en route at Woodstock, she received a written request from De Fenelon. He had been ordered to wait on her and give her an explanation of the massacre. He concluded by assuring her that Walsingham and his entire suite were unharmed.

By now it was known that the massacre had spread from Paris to Orléans and Rouen and as far south as Toulon. Those slaughtered were numbered at not less than fifty thousand, and Huguenot refugees were streaming into England in their hundreds.

Elizabeth received De Fenelon soon after her return to Whitehall, not privately, but in the presence of a full court. The audience chamber was hung from ceiling to floor in black drapes while she and every courtier wore full mourning.

When De Fenelon entered, he was greeted by complete silence. He had decked himself out in a suit of scarlet and gold, with a touch of royal blue here and there. This splash of color in such drab surroundings increased, as Elizabeth had intended, his general uneasiness. With the briefest of gestures she extended her hand for him to kiss, then before he could do so, she withdrew it deliberately.

"You have an explanation," she said severely. "Make it, monsieur."

De Fenelon unfolded a letter from His Majesty the King of France and in stifled tones began to read it.

"Speak up, monsieur!" Elizabeth commanded.

De Fenelon cleared his throat, began again in English where his first attempt had been in French, stumbled and relapsed again into French. A Huguenot plot had been discovered by the queen mother; the Huguenots had been intent on seizing power. They had planned to occupy the Louvre, murder the queen mother, make the king their prisoner and through him rule the country.

De Fenelon's voice faded away and for a moment Elizabeth held his eyes. He had no faith in the explanation he was reading; that was obvious. He cleared his throat again.

"Stern action was necessary, madam, if only to save the queen

mother's life, perhaps even the king's. It was a matter, an urgent matter, of striking first."

"In short, monsieur, it was thought necessary that innocent women and children should be murdered and domestic animals slaughtered."

De Fenelon had no reply to this. He bowed his head; he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. In the end, after another grim silence, he gathered courage enough to express the hope that the ties of friendship between England and France would not be entirely broken.

"Friendship . . ." Elizabeth rasped.

"His Royal Highness, the Duke of Alençon, for example—"

"Alençon!" she sneered.

"I do assure you, madam—"

"By God," she shouted, "would you turn a funeral march into a wedding march?"

Again De Fenelon had no reply and, satisfied that she had made her attitude abundantly clear, Elizabeth dismissed him abruptly.

"So much for that," she told Cecil later, "but I fear we have not yet heard the last of Alençon."

Chapter 38

The Earl of Leicester and Dr. John Dee, their shoulders almost touching, were bending over the charts and the numerous pages of calculations which lay before them on the wide table. From time to time one or the other, muttering excitedly to himself, added yet another calculation to yet another page.

"By the look of things," Elizabeth remarked, "you must be making considerable progress."

Standing at the other side of the table, she was watching them with amused eyes. At Robin's request, she had consented to consult the learned astrologer and she was determined to get as much fun out of the experience as she possibly could. Not that

she was entirely free of superstition when it came to astrological predictions. It always excited her to gain a possible glimpse of the future. Nevertheless, while gladly accepting all predictions of a pleasing character, she haughtily reserved the right to reject any that did not agree with her own desires or beliefs.

Dr. Dee, she recalled, had set a lucky day for her coronation—she supposed that on the whole it *had* been a lucky day—but she found it impossible to believe that if she had been crowned the day before or the day after, the coronation would have been less lucky.

“Have you reached any interesting conclusions about my own horoscope?” she asked.

Dr. Dee, a man of perhaps fifty, dressed now entirely in black satin, looked at her owlshly.

“Your Majesty, the forty-fifth year of your life is a highly important one, though in what way important we have not yet discovered.”

“The stars had better hurry, my dear doctor, with only five months left!”

Forty-five in five months’ time, she thought, while the two men continued to make their calculations. It was hard to believe that six years had passed since the St. Bartholomew massacres. Dwelling on the things that had happened since then, she wondered if Dr. Dee could have predicted them accurately. Could he, for instance, have known that Catherine de Medici would admit that she had made a grave mistake, that she would, after a further period of civil war in France, bring about an uneasy peace between the Catholic and the Huguenot parties?

And what could he have told her about Alençon? Alençon in actual fact, having had no hand himself in the massacres, had declared that he would dedicate his life to avenging the dead. This had brought him into disfavor at the French court, so he had tried to leave France for England, hoping to raise an army of Huguenot refugees. His mother had quickly foiled him in such a move, and thereafter both parties in France, acting separately, of course, had raised the marriage question once again. The Catholic party had wanted him out of the way with a promise from Elizabeth that he would never be permitted to return to France. The Huguenot party had wanted the mar-

riage in the hope that Alençon, backed by Protestant England, would indeed return, and with an army. And all the time the young prince, though not too papistical, had remained a Catholic.

It was as true as ever, Elizabeth thought, that when it came to the point, political expediency took precedence over religious belief. She had declined to negotiate openly with either party, and thereafter each had intrigued to prevent the other from making any progress at all toward such a match.

"You were casting Mary Stuart's horoscope as well as mine," Elizabeth said, taking an interest once more in the proceedings. "Have you discovered anything important?"

Dr. Dee looked grave. "Your Majesty, at present, I can say only this: she will not die a natural death."

"Can you give me the year of her death?"

Dr. Dee studied one of his many calculations. "Eight years from now, madam."

"How definite you sound! Will it be suicide, murder, or execution?"

"That is more than I can say, Your Majesty."

Actually the prediction that in eight years' time, she would be free forever of the Mary Stuart problem was more than Elizabeth could believe. And not a natural death? Mary, however hopeless she might feel, would never commit suicide. As for murder, even though some of Elizabeth's advisers wanted a secret assassination, that was certainly out of the question. And execution was not to be thought of either, since Mary in spite of all her secret negotiations with foreign courts had steadily refrained from implicating herself openly in any of the proposed attacks on Elizabeth's own life.

"Ah!" Robin cried, "what have we here!"

He passed the calculations he had been working on to Dr. Dee.

"Correct in every detail, my lord," the doctor pronounced.

"Well, what is it now?" Elizabeth asked impatiently.

Robin smiled broadly. "Alençon."

"Dear me, my lord," Dr. Dee protested fussily, "the prediction of names is most unwise. Events involving people, yes, but never names."

"Alençon is as good and possible a name as any in this case,"

Robin laughed. "In short, Your Majesty, the important event of your forty-fifth year is an offer of marriage."

"I see nothing important in yet *another* offer of marriage!"

"Ah, but the stars suggest that Your Majesty will also fall in love."

"With Alençon? Never!"

"Not necessarily with His Royal Highness the Duke of Alençon," Dr. Dee put in cautiously.

"Since we have the date of Alençon's birth," Robin suggested mischievously, "we may as well look into his fate for this year and see if it coincides with Your Majesty's."

"Do so by all means!"

Robin and Dr. Dee busied themselves again, and presently the doctor announced that the Duke of Alençon, perhaps not this year but soon, would visit England and be made much of at court.

"There!" Robin laughed.

"Most interesting," Elizabeth commented. "If your predictions are proved to be accurate, my dear doctor, I shall reward you adequately."

Dr. Dee bowed low. "Royal patronage is sufficient in itself, Your Majesty."

Then she asked about Robin's fate. "Since the Earl of Leicester and I were born on the same day, our horoscopes must be closely in tune. Is he, too, about to receive an offer of marriage?"

Dr. Dee made another rapid calculation, mumbling that the difference of even one hour in the two birth dates was too important to be ignored.

"Madam," he proclaimed at length, "the earl will, in fact, make a secret marriage."

"And the fortunate lady, will she be of high station?"

"Without doubt, Your Majesty."

"A queen, perhaps?" Robin asked solemnly.

"No, my lord, not a queen."

"My poor Robin," Elizabeth laughed, "I shall have to watch you most carefully. A secret marriage would be one made in fear of my displeasure. Say rather—" she tapped him lightly on the arm—"that you had better watch yourself."

She returned to Whitehall to find Hatton waiting for her with the news that the Duke of Alençon, who for some time had been held a state prisoner in the Louvre, had suddenly escaped. The coincidence of his name cropping up again in so short a time was a startling one; she was almost convinced that she would next hear that Alençon was seeking to renew the old marriage negotiations. Hatton went on to tell her that Cecil, with whom he had had a hasty conference, believed that Alençon, having once declared that his purpose in life was to free the Netherlands of Spanish aggression, would now place himself in command of the French mercenaries on the Flemish border.

"Cecil is almost always right," Elizabeth conceded, "even when he indulges in mere guesswork."

Two months later Elizabeth received a hurriedly written letter from Alençon himself. After having hidden in various parts of France, he was now about to do exactly what Cecil had predicted. And he hoped that the Queen of England, an inspiration to him ever since the St. Bartholomew massacres, would approve of his action. He ended his letter by asking for a renewal of the marriage negotiations and by informing her that he was taking the liberty of sending his chamberlain to London.

Dr. Dee again! The man was utterly amazing!

"How old is Alençon now?" she asked Hatton.

"Twenty-three, madam."

"The passing of six years has improved the situation somewhat. He is no longer less than half my age. I wonder if the gallant little prince has grown at all?"

Chapter 39

"The Duke of Alençon's chamberlain has reached London," Cecil said quietly, "but since he came without invitation, Your Majesty is not called upon to receive him."

"But I want to receive him!" Elizabeth cried. "The Earl of Leicester has been ordered to greet him in my name and pro-

vide him with all possible entertainment." She was looking at Cecil in considerable surprise. "Are you against a renewal of negotiations with Alençon?"

"I myself would prefer to let matters rest as they are," Cecil said evasively. "If Your Majesty is determined to negotiate with Alençon without consulting the council, the council, of course, is in no position to object."

"Are you trying to tell me that you and the rest of the council will stand aloof?"

"We are prepared to point out the advantages and the disadvantages, madam, and leave the decision to you."

"You were ever keen for me to preserve a balance of power in Europe," she said warmly. "I have been your pawn and England's often enough. Why now this amazing change?"

"Alençon, madam, has made this approach while in disfavor with the queen mother and without her support. That is the chief disadvantage, and to negotiate with him under such circumstances might completely wreck the uneasy friendship we still have with France."

"You spoke also of advantages!"

"I can see only one, and a doubtful one, at that. Alençon's personal interference in the Netherlands might help to maintain confusion there. On the other hand, it might provoke Spain to greater efforts and in the end leave that country in full control."

"And so you prefer to leave matters as they are. In a word, no marriage negotiations with Alençon's chamberlain."

"A reasonable-enough attitude, in all conscience, madam."

It was, and Elizabeth admitted it, but only to herself. The opposition of Cecil and the council in general had aroused her stubbornness. She admitted further, and again only to herself, that she had perhaps been carried away by the astrological predictions; but even so, it would be fun, and a relief from the boredom and restlessness which had plagued her of late, to receive Alençon's chamberlain and tempt him to extravagances greater even than those of De Fenelon.

"Whatever happens to Alençon," she said stiffly, "my policy is quite unchanged. Spain must never gain full control in the Netherlands, nor must Spain be entirely repulsed, thus leaving

the Netherlands either free and independent, or menaced by France."

"I am happy to hear Your Majesty say that."

"Nevertheless I shall receive Alençon's chamberlain tomorrow!"

Elizabeth gave Jean de Simier, the chamberlain, a state reception, wearing for the occasion a magnificent new gown of black and gold brocade and loading herself with jewelry. The farthingale was quite the largest she had ever worn, while her wig, a new one and worn for the first time, was blonde rather than red, a color which Mrs. Ashley, still at court and amazingly sprightly, had herself suggested. It gave the queen, said that faithful old lady, a most youthful appearance.

Jean de Simier was accompanied by a large suite of gaily dressed gentlemen. Robin had warned Elizabeth to prepare herself for a man weighted down with sorrow, for De Simier's wife had recently been caught in adultery with his younger brother, but sorrow was the last thing she could see portrayed on the Frenchman's darkly handsome face. He had large brown eyes, quite breath-takingly luminous; he was tall, gorgeously dressed, and his legs in their silken hose were a dream of perfection. His appearance alone, before he had uttered one sweetly worded sentence, was a subtle flattery in itself. In his presence, Robin Dudley and Chris Hatton, who stood on either side of her chair, were dowdy in the extreme. Alençon had chosen well this time, by God he had!

After polite and flowery greetings had been exchanged—De Simier's voice was even more breath-taking than his eyes—Elizabeth was offered, on Alençon's behalf, a collection of diamonds which she saw at a glance had cost a small fortune. De Simier then read a short letter in which his master referred no less than three times to the Queen of England as a goddess of high divinity.

"The very *highest* divinity," De Simier added, "as my master would realize were he standing now in Your Gracious Majesty's presence."

Well satisfied, Elizabeth dismissed him, noting as she did so, the look of hatred in Robin Dudley's eyes.

At their next meeting, which took place in private, and for

which she wore an even more magnificent gown, she realized that De Simier was a man of surprisingly few words. He spoke flatteringly but briefly and gave her the impression that he was anxious to conclude negotiations with the utmost speed. However, as his eyes lingered upon her his gaze was truly eloquent. It almost seemed that he was making love to her, not on Alençon's behalf, but his own.

"I do trust, monsieur," she said, "that you will not find it amiss that I should offer you my deepest sympathy."

"Sympathy, madam?"

"I refer, naturally, to your wife. Either she was a fool, or your brother is handsomer than you, which is scarcely possible."

"She was a fool, and my brother was also a fool," De Simier said fastidiously. "They both paid dearly for their folly. My brother was clubbed to death. Naturally, I scorned to soil my own hands. As for my wife, she drank poison. She was doubly a fool, for she complained of the bitter taste of the wine, yet drank it."

"And had she refused to drink it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Other means would have been found. Her death was advantageous for my mission."

"Advantageous?" Elizabeth faltered.

"Even though I am here to pay Your Majesty court on behalf of the Duke of Alençon, it is more fitting that I should be free of marital encumbrances."

Elizabeth was completely shattered. She looked at De Simier through a dazzling haze. It needed only the telling of the slightest lie—which became instantly the truth—for her to believe that this formidable male creature had killed his brother and his wife in order the better to serve his master, Alençon. No words could ever flatter so tremendously.

"The Duke of Alençon," he was saying, and Elizabeth was scarcely listening, "asks but a few trifling concessions in exchange for becoming Your Majesty's consort. He has no wish to become king. To be a duke of this kingdom, the Duke of York, for instance, would be adequate. His tastes are simple. The income from an English duchy would be sufficient for his needs, plus a separate income of sixty thousand English pounds per annum."

The haze cleared rapidly; De Simier's last sentence had penetrated sharply.

"Sixty thousand pounds per annum!" Elizabeth cried indignantly. "My income, without resort to Parliament, is only five times greater. A fifth of my income! Preposterous!"

De Simier gave her a cynical smile. "How remiss of me, madam. I had forgotten the warning that Your Majesty was inclined to stinginess when calls were made on the privy purse."

Stinginess! A bold one, this De Simier, bold in every respect, it seemed. She stared at him through misty eyes. The haze was clouding her vision again. By God, she thought, I do believe I'm falling in love with the wretch! Well, Dr. Dee had seen it in the stars. What was to be, would be.

"I feel sure, monsieur," she said faintly, "that as these negotiations go forward we shall have many interesting and quite amicable little discussions."

And by heaven, she thought giddily, the negotiations would be delayed again and again, this time. After all, why shouldn't she enjoy herself for once?

Chapter 40

"The story of De Simier's mission is common property now," Robin said angrily. "England is alarmed and horrified at the prospect of a French marriage. The Protestants will never forget the St. Bartholomew massacres."

He looked as angry as he sounded, standing there with his legs planted firmly apart, his arms clasped across his now massive chest.

"The howls of dismay have already reached my ears," she said airily.

"Yet you take no heed of them?"

"No heed whatever."

"Are you crazy, Bess? You must be! You were always so careful to listen to the voice of public opinion and act accordingly."

"Hold your tongue, my lord!" she said sharply.

She was newly back from an excursion on the river with De Simier and had commanded him to take supper with her to-night. He had been at court for months—she had only a hazy

idea of the exact period—and many had been the parties, fetes and balls given in his honor. Time was of no account whatever. She had had another birthday but had ignored it. She was growing younger day by day, not older.

"The council is just as disturbed as the people," Robin said.

"As if that matters!"

Cecil and the others still stood aloof, however disturbed they might be. They muttered among themselves and held countless conferences, but they remained aloof. They had decided, she'd been told, that any interference would only prolong the love-sickness.

"Without De Simier to dance attendance, you'd never give Alençon a second thought."

"You're racked with jealousy!"

"Can you blame me if I am, Bess?"

"No," she admitted. "You have always wanted to be the royal consort and would do anything, providing you dared, to prevent any other man's becoming my husband."

"Anything, anything!" Robin cried wildly.

"Take care I don't banish you, my lord! As it is, the less I see you at court the better."

"Are you on the point of announcing a betrothal?" he asked, stubbornly holding his ground.

"Your question is an impudent one. You have no right to ask it."

"I am still a member of the council, madam."

"That can be easily remedied!"

"Merely because De Simier has induced in you the ridiculous belief that lost youth can be recovered in the twinkling of an eye?"

Elizabeth darted at him then, slapped his face, and dragged his sword from its scabbard. He backed quickly to the door.

"Coward!" she screamed, flourishing the sword.

Robin tore open the door and, with no semblance whatever of dignity, fled from her presence. Laughing now, she flung the sword after him and slammed the door.

There was one sure way of keeping De Simier in England, for he was hinting that unless an agreement was soon reached he would be obliged to take his leave. She would invite Alençon

to come to England. It was the only thing she *could* do, for she was hard pressed now by the French court as well as by De Simier. Alençon had become reconciled with his mother and his brother, the king, and the French court had thrown its weight behind the negotiations.

That night she told De Simier that she was ready to receive Alençon in England, and the next morning she instructed Hatton to prepare a passport granting Alençon safe conduct. Having signed it she waited for her privy council's reaction.

The council met after what seemed to her a long and careless delay, and finally Cecil begged permission to wait on her.

"If you have come to protest—!" she greeted him.

Cecil shook his head. "I have two reasons, Your Majesty. Monsieur de Simier was attacked last night outside the French embassy. The unknown assailant escaped."

"And De Simier—?" she gasped.

"He was quite unhurt."

"By God, Robin Dudley!"

"The Earl of Leicester was playing cards at the time with Sir Christopher Hatton and several other gentlemen."

"You fool, Cecil! I didn't mean that Robin would attack De Simier himself. For heaven's sake have him closely watched in future. Arrest and question any stranger he comes in contact with."

"Whatever you say, madam."

"You spoke of two reasons for wanting to see me. What is the other?"

Cecil laid before her a much-fingered pamphlet. The author, he said, was John Stubbs, a well-known Puritan extremist, and copies of his work were being circulated in London. "Your Majesty will find the whole discourse objectionable. It expresses what many people feel, horror at the thought of a French marriage, but in language that is both lewd and seditious."

"Lewdness is not exceptional in England, even where Puritans are concerned. But sedition, I'll have none of that." She was turning the pages without much interest. "I see you have marked a few lines."

"The more offensive ones, madam."

"God's precious soul!" she exclaimed. "The wretched author

warns me of the dangers of childbearing. Not only that, but of childbearing at my time of life! Arrest this John Stubbs and the printer."

"That has already been done, madam."

"Then why must you hurt me by drawing my attention to this monstrous document?"

"You would have discovered it in time," Cecil said wryly, "and castigated me for not being the first to bring it to your notice. Then, too, the council feels that your physicians should issue a declaration respecting Your Majesty's ability to bear children."

"Who made such an insolent suggestion?"

"The Earl of Leicester, madam."

"Very well, let them issue a declaration!" she cried.

Cecil hesitated. "If I may make so bold, madam, an examination would be necessary first."

Nonplused at first, Elizabeth was soon smiling broadly, for obviously only the most perfunctory of examinations would be needed. The physicians could tell at a glance that her health was excellent, and they would take her own word for it that menstruation was still regular. Of course it was! She was growing younger all the time; it would be years and years before she suffered the change of life.

"Summon the physicians at once," she commanded and withdrew to the royal bedchamber.

The perfunctory examination was made and a declaration was immediately issued saying that Her Majesty the Queen was quite capable of bearing children. This filled Elizabeth with a vast exultation. She nursed the good news for the rest of the day and woke during the night still nursing it. Six learned physicians must surely be right.

At dawn the next morning she was in high spirits. A feeling of lightness pervaded her whole being. It seemed as if a great weight had been lifted from her mind. She was so clear-sighted that she was sure she could read all men's minds by merely glancing into their eyes. Jumping from her bed, her feet seemed scarcely to touch the floor. She wanted to dance for the very joy of living.

De Simier came to Whitehall early that morning and, receiving him eagerly, Elizabeth told him at once that a ball would be given in honor of Alençon the following night.

"It is fortunate that I am still alive to attend it on his behalf," De Simier all but snarled.

"My dear De Simier—!"

"I was attacked again last night, madam, and again the would-be assassin escaped. I went straight to the Earl of Leicester. He laughed in my face and made no attempt to deny that he had set the man upon me."

"You mean, he admitted it?"

"He made no attempt, as I say, to deny it."

Elizabeth was not as greatly disturbed as De Simier evidently expected her to be. On reflection, it was not unpleasing to think that Robin had been reduced to such extreme measures by jealousy. And De Simier, no novice when it came to murder, could be relied on always to take good care of himself.

"However, it is now my turn to laugh in *his* face," De Simier went on. "Everybody who knows the position which the earl holds at Your Majesty's court has been afraid to tell you the truth about him, but I, madam, am not."

"The truth?"

"Some little time ago the Earl of Leicester made a secret marriage with the widow of the Earl of Essex."

Elizabeth's head shot up. This was a different matter.

"By God," she cried, "I'll send him to the Tower!"

She summoned Hatton and demanded all the details. He told her briefly that Robin had been engaged for some time in a love affair with the widowed Countess of Essex. The affair had injured her reputation and her father, Sir Francis Knollys, had insisted on marriage.

"All of which was going on under my nose, yet I noticed nothing!"

She dismissed Hatton and sent for Robin, ordering that he be brought to her under guard. He had behaved shamefully and the Tower was too good for him. His new wife, a cousin of hers on the Boleyn side, had always been a spiteful creature, and that made his disloyalty all the more heinous. She greeted him with

a bombardment of all the expletives she had ever heard, invented new ones, and only paused for breath when her imagination was exhausted.

"Before I send you to the Tower," she went on more quietly, "you may explain your disloyalty, but briefly, mind you, briefly."

"I was trapped into the marriage," Robin mumbled.

"Ah yes, Knollys insisted on it, but I see no trap there, except one of your own making. You began, it seems, by sleeping with the woman."

"Very well, then, I was driven to it."

"By spite, perhaps?"

"Spite if you like."

"Yet the affair and the marriage were kept secret. Secret spite can hurt no one."

"I hesitated to offend your maiden modesty," he sneered.

"By God," she shouted, "I ought to make you suffer for this in the same way as that dirty-minded Stubbs suffered for his pamphlet!"

The pamphleteer had been found guilty of breaking a law brought into force during Mary's reign. The penalty called for the severing of his right hand.

"You, my lord, should lose *both* hands. That would impede your illicit lovmaking. I say illicit, for I shall never recognize your marriage." She called the guards from the corridor. "Take the prisoner to the Tower!"

Robin turned at the door.

"God save the queen," he whispered viciously, "by which I mean, God save England."

Chapter 41

"His Royal Highness has arrived," De Simier announced. "He made the journey in disguise, as Your Majesty requested, and is now safely lodged in the pavilion."

Elizabeth smiled approvingly. She was at Greenwich Palace, attended by only a few unimportant members of the court, and

De Simier had been given the use of a small, comfortable pavilion situated on the riverbank within easy walking distance of the palace. While taking the air, she could easily make an informal call on De Simier at the pavilion and meet his master, the Duke of Alençon.

"Is his presence suspected?" she asked.

De Simier shrugged. "The whole of London *suspects* that His Royal Highness is in England. According to one story, he arrived a week ago, spent two days in secret with Your Majesty and then hurried back across the Channel."

"Since secrecy is so essential, two days will certainly be long enough."

"Your Majesty can make up your mind in so short a time?"

"Perhaps I shall make up my mind in five minutes," Elizabeth laughed. "On the other hand, it may take five weeks, five months, even five years."

Within an hour she was walking unattended in the palace grounds. It was late evening, the twilight well advanced, the cloudless August sky an opalescent haze. She walked first toward a small fort, once used as a guardhouse, but now, with a few guards still on duty, the forced abode of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, for Robin's father-in-law had prevailed upon her to change her mind about the Tower. It was amusing to think that Robin and Alençon were in such close proximity.

De Simier was waiting at the pavilion and ushered her ceremoniously into the small entrance hall, and there, in the semi-darkness, she came face to face with François de Valois, Duke of Alençon. He was surrounded by a suite of six or seven gentlemen. The duke emerged from their midst in such a rush that he seemed intent on vaulting over their shoulders. At first the queen thought this proved his eagerness, but soon realized it was only his normal mode of walking, if you could call it walking. It was more like hopping, and since he was even shorter than she had expected, a very squat little figure indeed, she was instantly reminded of a frog. He fell to his knees with a great sigh, causing Elizabeth to stoop slightly so that he might kiss her hand.

"Light of my life!" he gasped.

It was a satisfactory-enough opening, though she felt rather

awkward as she towered over him. She began a sweetly worded response, but to her amazement something like a snarl of horror issued from her throat. She did her best to turn it into a gurgle of delight.

"My dear Alençon," she exclaimed, "we have much to say to each other. Shall we withdraw?"

De Simier, who had awaited this signal, led them immediately to an inner room. Elizabeth strode forward, feeling like a giantess, and Alençon bounded up and down in her wake, trying to keep pace. It seemed impossible that he could be a soldier, the commander of an army, but no doubt he looked better sitting a horse.

Candles had been lighted in the inner room—a small closet which De Simier had turned into a study—and now she was able to see Alençon's face more clearly.

She noticed at once that the smallpox scars had not been removed, as Catherine de Medici had promised. Not that they were any great disadvantage; more people than not carried such scars. She herself had a few, which she chose to regard as a badge of honor, a sign that she had come close to death and had escaped.

She peered at him closer now. His skin was swarthier than she had been led to believe, she wondered whether she should call him her Little Frog or her Little Moor. She had been carefully avoiding the main feature of his face, but that was no longer possible. The artist who had painted his portrait had been far too kind. Alençon's nose was utterly monstrous. It looked as if it had been slit soon after the poor fellow's birth and had grown outward, to the right and left.

She sat down at the desk to steady herself. Alençon, with a single bound, placed himself on the top of the desk bringing his face level with her own. She repressed a shudder of horror. After all, poor little Alençon had not been able to choose his physique and general appearance, but surely he possessed a poetic soul, as suggested by his words, "Light of my life." And certainly he had beautiful eyes, larger than De Simier's and almost as luminous. To her surprise, she saw that they were swimming now with tears. She was touched, most deeply touched.

"Are you afraid of me," she asked, "or are they tears of joy?"

"Of joy, what else, after all these years of waiting?" He had a pleasing and surprisingly deep voice.

"I myself have found the waiting tedious also," she replied.

"Tedious!" Alençon exclaimed. "If life in hell is tedious, I have suffered all the torments of that region since I was seventeen."

It was hardly fitting that he should speak, even obliquely, of the difference in their ages, but Elizabeth let it pass. After all, he was older now by eight years and she was younger by many many more, or so she tried to tell herself.

"Even before then," Alençon ran on, "Elizabeth Tudor was the ideal of my life. I learned everything possible about you. I, too, suffered your early adversities and injustices, and I rejoiced in the later triumphs. I stood at your side when the crown was placed on your head and I wept for joy."

Alençon was four years old at the time, no more, a voice whispered.

Elizabeth shook with anger; it was *that* woman again, sneering like the horrible bitch she was.

"And when marriage was first suggested," he cried, "I was in very heaven."

She stroked his cheek and looked into his eyes. She was on safe ground, providing she could avoid the terrible nose and concentrate on the rich reverberations of his manly voice. Quickly she stroked his cheek again.

"So desperate have I been for Your Majesty's love," he added with a deep groan, "that unless you promise to marry me, I swear I shall kill myself!"

Elizabeth rose shakily from the desk. Alençon snatched the dagger from his belt and placed the point against his heart.

"I mean it, madam, I mean it!"

Elizabeth kissed him lightly on the brow.

"We shall meet again tomorrow," she said, "and perhaps—who knows?—come close to plighting our troth."

De Simier escorted Elizabeth back to her apartments at the palace. It was quite dark now and torchbearers had been summoned. There were eight of them, two walking ahead, two behind, and two on either side.

"Some little progress has been made?" De Simier suggested. "Perhaps, monsieur—ah, listen!"

Close by, in the marshy ground near the river, frogs were croaking lustily.

That night the frogs disturbed Elizabeth's sleep, and once, waking suddenly, she was sure that several of the slimy creatures were hopping crazily about the bed. She was reminded then of Alençon and was filled with disgust. Ugh! think of it, a frog in bed with her every night of her life! After that, sleep was impossible until she finally remembered that if she *did* marry Alençon, De Simier could be her official court favorite.

The second meeting took place at the same hour on the following night, and so persuasive was Alençon and so eager was Elizabeth to be persuaded, that she agreed to a secret betrothal.

"I demand secrecy," she told him, "because I need time to convince my people that you are as acceptable to them as you are to me."

But Alençon was no longer listening. He fell down from the desk on which he had been sitting and bounded to the door. Flinging it open, he bounded along the corridor in search of De Simier. Elizabeth followed him slowly and presently heard him breaking the good news. She hung back, listening.

"A betrothal, a betrothal! You understand? The perfect goddess my promised wife at last! Embrace me, my dear De Simier, embrace me!"

"Considerable progress," Elizabeth heard De Simier say, "but I myself will not be content until the curtains are drawn, the candles out, and Your Highness safely in the royal bed."

This remark nagged vaguely at her as she walked back to the palace. The croaking frogs in the near distance seemed to snatch up the cynical words and hurl them back at her. They were still there, still nagging, when later she lay sleepless in her bed.

"And what then?" she said in the darkness.

The answer, which she refused to utter, was obvious enough, and for the first time since she had joyfully and willfully accepted the physicians' declaration, she faced the truth. She was lying quite still now, making no attempt to stem the heavy tears rolling down her cheeks, the self-pity of a lifetime. She remembered Mary and her imaginary pregnancies, and that had a

steadying effect. Dear heaven, to have come so close to resembling Mary! She thought of De Simier. His remark had really been innocent enough. All he had meant was that a queen who had evaded the marriage bed so adroitly for so long might evade it yet again, betrothal or no betrothal.

"And I will, by God!"

De Simier had been the start of it all. No, she herself had been the start of it all. De Simier's courtship had merely taken the thing further, given her an opportunity of playing the sorry little game of falling in love. But why—why? The answer was a simple one, but she refused to contemplate it. That would be taking honesty too far! The important question now was how to get out of the entanglement.

She could think of only one answer.

Cecil, the faithful, long-suffering Cecil, must be called to the rescue.

Chapter 42

Elizabeth having ordered Robin's release from the guard-house, returned in haste to Whitehall with Robin himself in attendance. She then summoned Cecil and said candidly: "I reached a secret agreement with Alençon, and now I regret it."

"Betrothal?" Cecil asked.

"Yes."

"Under the circumstances—" Cecil demurred.

"You think me still lovesick? What a fool you were ever to think that! You know only too well how experience has taught me to pretend convincingly—" She broke off abruptly.

"Indeed, madam."

"I suspected from the first that Alençon, if encouraged, would do anything I asked. I looked to the future when he would be the King of France, and I saw myself in control of France as a bulwark against Spain. Then I realized that my imagination had carried me too far. The present King of France is young and healthy and might outlive the Queen of England."

"Yet Your Majesty agreed to a secret betrothal."

"Only because the poor young man threatened to kill himself!"

Cecil was silent for a moment, then he smiled broadly.

"The secret betrothal will have its uses, madam. It will serve to keep the Duke of Alençon dangling until we have no further need of him."

Elizabeth looked completely amazed. "You were against the negotiations, yet now you want me to keep Alençon dangling! You remained aloof and disapproving, but now you suggest that Alençon can be of use to us!"

"The European position has changed rapidly, madam. God bless Your Majesty for persisting in the Alençon negotiations. Spain is making far too much progress in the Netherlands. Alençon has an army at his disposal. If he can be persuaded to use it against the Spanish forces instead of merely for the protection of the Catholic Flemings he will be serving our cause very well indeed."

Elizabeth began to feel trapped. She had looked to Cecil to free her of the entanglement, yet here he was suggesting blandly that she should remain helplessly enmeshed. It was all but insupportable. What a victim of circumstance she was, had indeed been all her life!

"Very well," she said furiously, "Alençon, heaven help me, shall be kept dangling."

No sooner had she made this decision than she received from the duke the first of a long series of love letters, a series that continued for months and months. He wrote, he said in the first letter, as a man, and not as a prince whose duty it was to negotiate a marriage of mere political convenience. Elizabeth smiled covertly. It was impossible not to be flattered, especially with the waters of the Channel between them, and while allowing Cecil to draw up a draft marriage treaty with France, she replied in kind, thus keeping Alençon, or so it seemed from his letters, in a condition bordering on hysteria.

Once the treaty was ready for her signature she caused it to be redrafted to provide for a lapse of two months before ratification, hoping thereby to induce Alençon to relieve Cambrai, now besieged by Spanish forces. But Catherine de Medici, sus-

pecting Elizabeth's intended last-minute evasion, brought into force an order for the dispersal of Alençon's army, and so the treaty remained in any case unratified.

"I can do no more," Elizabeth told Cecil in despair.

Alençon, however, refused to disperse his men and begged Elizabeth to send him money for their continued support. She hesitated. It was one thing to use Alençon, quite another to pay him for his services. While she still hesitated, and after twelve months had passed since his visit, one of the most exciting and stimulating events of her reign took place. Francis Drake returned to England after circumnavigating the world.

For some years now, Elizabeth had maintained a lively interest in Drake's adventures. Encouraged by her, but warned sternly that if he fell into Spanish hands she would be unable to help him, he had made a grand voyage to the West Indies, she herself investing money in the venture. Eventually, having plundered several towns in a spirit of revenge, for he had not forgotten how he and Hawkins had earlier been attacked by Spanish warships, he had captured a highly valuable Spanish cargo. On his return Elizabeth had received him at court and publicly accepted the present of a Negro slave, while privately she had also accepted her share of the loot. King Philip, unable to prove anything, had merely protested angrily. Thus encouraged, Elizabeth had sent Drake away once more.

That was three years ago, and now he was back in England, the first Englishman to have sailed completely round the world. She had ordered him merely to rescue English prisoners held in the Spanish colonies but, understanding her perfectly and accepting more of her money, he had returned with treasure far in excess of her expectations.

"Nevertheless," Cecil commented grimly, "Drake has played the pirate far too openly this time for Spain to ignore the matter. The Spanish ambassador has already protested, and most emphatically."

Elizabeth set her jaw stubbornly. "When one pirate gets the better of another, no one can say who is to blame."

"Spain nonetheless demands restitution."

"When I was a child I knew quite well that finding was keeping," Elizabeth stated flatly.

"The demand in itself is an unspoken threat of war, madam."

"Philip is making war on me already."

Cecil sighed heavily. "Ah yes . . . Ireland."

The Irish were in revolt and Philip had sent Spanish forces to help the rebels. It had been a secret move at first, but the secret had not been kept for long. Philip claimed that the Irish rebels were merely employing mercenaries who happened to be of Spanish origin. Elizabeth, of course, had refused to accept this excuse. It came to this, she thought now: Philip was harrying her in Ireland just as she wanted Alençon to harry him in the Netherlands.

"The Spanish treasure will provide all the money Alençon needs," she said gleefully.

"Spain is stronger than ever before," Cecil pointed out.

"The relief of Cambrai will bring dear Philip down a peg or two."

"And when will that take place, madam?"

"As soon as I can put new heart into the lovesick Alençon!"

Drake had returned in November. Early in the new year, while the Spanish ambassador was still muttering about restitution, a French commission arrived from Paris, intent on settling the marriage question once and for all. France still wanted the marriage and was even willing now that Alençon should march to the relief of the hard-pressed forces at Cambrai.

"Splendid!" Elizabeth cried when Cecil brought her the news. "I shall now be able to keep all the treasure in the Tower. Drake shall of course receive his just reward and a knighthood as well!"

"The French condition," Cecil sighed, "is that the marriage must take place *before* the relief of Cambrai."

"Must it indeed! Alençon could easily fail. What a useless sacrifice I'd have made of myself then. Let him prove his military ability first."

Cecil sighed again. "The French are adamant, madam. No marriage, no relief of Cambrai."

"Very well! Draw up another marriage treaty, but delay the ratification with the usual clause. Meanwhile I'll vow such love for Alençon as no woman has ever vowed before for any man. But privately, mind you, privately! I'll instill in the Little Frog all the ardor of a knight of old, dangle my heart before him, and send him to Cambrai in defiance of the whole world!"

"Alençon will need money," Cecil pointed out.

"My God, so he will!" It was a deterring thought, but Elizabeth laughed recklessly. "Who knows the exact value of the Spanish treasure? No one! Alençon shall have the money."

Much to her delight, however, Alençon acted suddenly and without further prompting marched to the relief of Cambrai. He had raised an army of seventeen thousand men, heaven knew how—reports suggested that many of them were volunteers and self-supporting—all that mattered was that he did relieve Cambrai, and the treasure remained intact in the Tower.

But the keenness of Elizabeth's satisfaction was somewhat blunted by Alençon's next move. First she learned that he had resigned his command, then that he had appeared suddenly in England. He had come, it was true, in defiance of the wishes of his mother and brother, for the French were afraid that he might have provoked Spain too far. The sober fact remained, however, that here he was, and probably more lovesick than ever.

"My God, what am I to do now?" Elizabeth asked Cecil and Chris Hatton and Robin Dudley, indeed all the members of her privy council. "You must put your heads together and help me deal with him."

Complicating matters, a new French commission followed close on Alençon's heels to support him in the marriage negotiations. The queen mother and the king, their hands forced by Alençon's rashness, were trying to make the most of a ticklish situation, hoping that France and England together would be strong enough to repulse any possible Spanish reprisal. And so once again, and in greater despair, Elizabeth asked Cecil and the others what she must do. Robin himself, eager to regain her full favor, put forward the old suggestion that she should ask for the return of Calais.

"I had already thought of that!" she cried.

To everybody's amazement, France agreed to the return of Calais. The council was instantly divided. Some members, sentimental still about Calais, urged Elizabeth to announce the date of the wedding.

"Ask now for another French port," Robin suggested.

Elizabeth poked him in the ribs, pinched his nose—such a nice aquiline nose, so very acceptable when the Alençon monstrosity was threatening her so desperately—and laughed for

joy. She asked for Le Havre, and that, so far as France was concerned, ended the negotiations.

She then began, and in grim earnest, to tackle the difficult task of getting Alençon out of England. Up to now, of course, she had continued to encourage him. She had given him apartments at court, very good apartments too, for they contained a separate bathroom; she had feted him outrageously, allowed him to embrace her in public, had made on the whole, she thought, a quite pathetic exhibition of herself. Trying to forget all this, she reiterated the old objection, telling him that in Protestant England his religion was the real stumbling block.

"Religion!" Alençon cried, his deep voice breaking hysterically. "For years and years Elizabeth Tudor has been my life, my religion. Your religion is mine. I shall become a Protestant at once."

"The Pope would excommunicate you."

"Pooh! What do I care for the fires of hell? Nothing, nothing whatever! I seek a more devastating fire. I burn already at the very thought of it!"

Elizabeth sighed with regret. It was perhaps the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her.

"My people would never believe in your conversion," she told him gently. "The Protestants, especially the Puritans, would call it a ruse; they would even call excommunication a papist plot."

Tears sprang to Alençon's eyes; he fell to his knees and grasped at her hands. She freed herself, and he tore at her skirt.

"You who are dearer to me than my own mother," he moaned.

"Don't say that you love me as a mother!" she protested sharply.

"Now I have offended you!" he bawled.

She touched his head lightly. On many occasions his own mother had treated him harshly. Was it possible that he had mistaken the love of a son for that of an ardent suitor? How insulting if he had! She was not as old as all that, by heaven! Yet she felt deeply touched and began to despair of ever getting rid of him.

"I'll consult the privy council again," she promised.

Doing nothing of the sort, she commanded the Earl of Leices-

ter, her master of the horse, and Sir Christopher Hatton, still at times her captain of the guard, to prepare a grand escort for the purpose of conducting Alençon to the coast.

"Make it a royal progress," she said. "I myself shall travel with him part of the way. But mind you, don't spend too much money on it!"

She kept Alençon waiting for several days, then she told him she had the worst of bad news for him.

"The council confirmed my suspicions," she said sadly. "They feel sure that Protestant England would never accept you under any condition at all. Worse, they have evidence of grave unrest in many parts of the country. Abortive risings have already been discovered and forestalled. There is evidence, too, that the Puritans are plotting a rebellion, their aim being to murder me and turn my kingdom into a republic. I go hourly in fear of assassination."

"Monstrous, monstrous!" Alençon sobbed.

"It breaks my heart to do it, but I must beg you to make the supreme sacrifice and, for my sake as well as your own, leave England at once."

Alençon was weeping now, his tears in full flood. He tried to speak but failed. She stooped as he flung himself upon her and, holding him in her arms, murmured comforting little phrases. She began to feel quite motherly, but when, in a paroxysm of weeping, not really knowing what he said, he called her "mother," she released him none too gently and begged him to be a man.

"Is this the brave soldier who rode so gallantly to the relief of Cambrai?"

He controlled himself at last. He said his heart was broken; he added resentfully that he had made a disgusting spectacle of himself.

"But worse, madam, I began by making a fool of myself at seventeen and of late have permitted you to do it for me."

"Then the broken heart will soon be put together again," she said cheerfully.

He shook his head sadly. "No, Your Majesty, it will kill me in the end."

Elizabeth traveled with him as far as Canterbury. He wept

again when taking leave of her, and to console him she told him that she would send him a present in gold to the value of twenty-five thousand pounds. She regretted her rashness the moment the words were uttered, but it was too late; she had uttered them, and in the presence of witnesses too. Rashness—it was more than that; it was weakness, despicable weakness. She must have loved him in a way—yes, even as a son. But twenty-five thousand pounds! Fortunately for her peace of mind, she remembered the Spanish treasure and, dwelling on it, concluded that her generosity was not so badly misplaced after all.

“I do not expect you to spend the money in reckless indulgence,” she said sternly. “Use it prudently in future military ventures.”

“Anything you wish, anything,” Alençon said obediently.

She gave him a farewell kiss on the brow and began to feel much happier. What did it matter if Elizabeth Tudor, the cunning stateswoman, had got the better of Elizabeth Tudor, the soft-hearted woman? She had served her country well. Her main concern was that unrest should continue in the Netherlands and, continuing, avert yet again the threat of a Spanish invasion.

VII. Walsingham

Chapter 43

"Fifty-three spies—you employ as many as that?" Elizabeth asked in surprise. She was speaking to Sir Francis Walsingham, now her chief secretary of state.

"That, Your Majesty, is merely the present number placed strategically in different parts of Europe," he replied. "We have many others in England."

"But think of the cost!" she exclaimed in horror.

"One contrives," he said gruffly.

Elizabeth gave him a knowing look. She was well aware that he drew largely on his own private income in order to maintain the efficiency of the spy system at the head of which Cecil had placed him. Yet she had never liked Walsingham, clever and indispensable though he was. Fanatical Puritans dismayed and disgusted her.

"One of our cleverest agents," Walsingham was saying, "has now established himself in Rome. To be precise, madam, in the College of Cardinals."

"How delightful! Has he deceived the cardinals into accepting him into their own exclusive brotherhood?"

"He has secured the post of private secretary to one of them, madam."

"Splendid! Whether or not he has money of his own, he is now quite self-supporting."

Walsingham acknowledged this with the faintest inclination of his head.

"He has been able to report already, madam, that the Spanish ambassador in London is working secretly with certain prominent English Catholics. Have I Your Majesty's permission to intercept his correspondence?"

"As if you need ask!"

"Thank you, madam. The matter shall be given my immediate attention."

When Walsingham had withdrawn, Elizabeth began to compose a letter to Alençon who, during the seventeen or eighteen months since his departure, had written to her constantly. He seemed to be as lovesick as ever and professed himself well content to live on in the hope that he might be able to serve her to some real purpose some day, somewhere. This seemed scarcely likely, for he had abandoned his command once more and did little but wander aimlessly from place to place.

Nevertheless, there was always the chance that he might yet be useful, if ever he became King of France. And so she wrote to him now in highly affectionate terms, enclosing a poem designed to instill in him the most self-sacrificing of thoughts.

A week later Walsingham presented evidence of an intrigue between the Spanish ambassador and the English Catholics, aimed at placing the former Scottish queen on the English throne.

"Is Mary Stuart herself involved?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, madam. Yet, the fact that she is still alive and in England is the basic cause of the trouble. She would support the intrigue, if given the opportunity, especially since she has turned so bitterly against her son."

Elizabeth agreed. Mary's son, King James, was now nineteen. Elizabeth had made a treaty with him, wrote to him frequently—after all he was her godson—and not only granted him a pension but had further encouraged him with a promise that if he behaved himself, she *might* name him her heir.

"I doubt if the Spanish ambassador expects a successful rising in England," Walsingham went on. "He would welcome it merely as a diversion, and would continue to create other similar diversions, each designed to weaken England and make way for an eventual Spanish invasion." He placed a sheet of paper before Elizabeth. "This, madam, is a copy of a letter from

the ambassador to King Philip. The sentence I have underlined is a grim warning of King Philip's ultimate intention."

Elizabeth read the underlined sentence quickly:

"The religious dissension in England, a country divided into various opposing sects, will, if cultivated and increased, make a successful invasion possible within a matter of two or three years."

"Philip of Spain has always wanted England," she said lightly, "but he was never rash. I can visualize him even now weighing the pros and cons. In this case he will decide that no move can be made until he has conquered William of Orange in the Netherlands, or possibly formed an alliance with France."

"But," Walsingham asserted, "France, or at all events the Guise faction, would never agree. The Guises have a plan of their own. I am collecting the details now and will soon be able to give Your Majesty a full report."

"Spain on the one hand, France on the other!" Elizabeth raged. "The situation has changed not at all since I came to the throne. England for England, that is still my cry!"

"We are hampered now by the fact that Your Majesty is no longer in the marriage market," Walsingham said bluntly.

"Indeed? Are you suggesting that I am too old to marry?"

Walsingham stood his ground. "The courts of Europe hold that opinion, madam."

"And you too, apparently!"

He shook his head. "Your Majesty is not too old to marry. No woman ever is. Nevertheless Your Majesty is too old to bear children."

Elizabeth shook with rage. This insolent Puritan should be dismissed from office—but no, unfortunately he was too valuable a servant to be discharged.

"Have the Spanish ambassador arrested," she said, venting her spleen on that trouble-making gentleman. "Bring him before the council. Confront him with the evidence of his perfidy, lecture him sternly, as only a Puritan can, and send him back to Spain."

"Your Majesty—"

"Well, why do you hesitate?"

"Your orders shall be carried out to the letter, madam. But

what I was about to say is this: Your Majesty should increase the palace guard and refrain from going abroad, unattended and unprotected as you do so often."

"Have you discovered another foreign plot to assassinate me?" Elizabeth asked. There had been three such plots during the past year. "Well, have you?"

Walsingham shook his head. "I merely judged it a wise precaution, madam. Word reached me this morning of a new but unsuccessful attempt on the life of William of Orange. The would-be assassin was in Spanish pay. 'William of Orange first,' he babbled when questioned, 'Elizabeth of England next.'"

"I was never a coward," she said heatedly. "I'll not have it said that I go in fear of my life in my own country."

The Spanish ambassador was replaced, after a few weeks, by a mere Spanish agent, a man unprotected by diplomatic immunity, and he, quickly exposed as another intriguer, was arrested, held in the Tower for a time and then escorted to the coast. King Philip retaliated by ordering the English ambassador to leave Spain and by refusing to accept another in his place.

Soon after this Catherine de Medici sent a special messenger to Elizabeth with the news that Alençon had suddenly died of heart failure. Uncommonly touched, the English queen told herself that Alençon had died of a broken heart. And when the French messenger offered her a full wardrobe of mourning clothes, a present from the bereaved mother, she changed into them eagerly. On reflection, however, she suspected that Catherine de Medici's gift had been made in a spirit of mockery. And on further reflection she decided that in wearing mourning for Alençon she was metaphorically beating her breast because of her own lost youth. A month later, when Walsingham brought news of the successful assassination of William of Orange, she took a very different view of Catherine de Medici's gift.

"A French or a Spanish assassin?" she demanded.

"Madam—"

"A French assassin, by God he was! Catherine de Medici knew all about it and meant me to wear mourning in advance, yes and on my own account! William of Orange first, Elizabeth of England next—*that* was the unspoken message!"

"All the more reason, madam, for you to take greater care of yourself."

"Rubbish! I shall die in my bed at Whitehall, die of old age. Dr. Dee himself predicted that last year. As for this mourning, I'll continue to wear it in defiance of my enemies."

Yet the privy council, headed by Cecil, and supported ardently by Robin Dudley and Christopher Hatton, took a more serious view of the assassination of William of Orange. They gathered about themselves the leading Protestant nobles and drew up what they called a Bond of Association. In it they swore to protect their queen, prevent, if humanly possible, any attempt at murder, and wreak vengeance upon her enemies. They swore also, and this became an act of Parliament, that should the queen's life be taken, any person for or by whom the deed was committed should be capitally punished.

"We naturally have the ex-queen of Scotland in mind," Walsingham said.

"And also your own interests," Elizabeth snapped.

"We have every reason to be concerned on our own account," he pointed out. "Your Majesty as yet has named no successor. If you died suddenly there would be no real government, and the country would soon be in turmoil."

"You weary me with this talk of death!" Elizabeth raged. "I'll have no more of it."

However, soon after this, Walsingham exposed another plot. It had its roots, not in Spain as might have been expected, but in France. The Guise faction there was planning a marriage between the Duke of Guise and Mary Stuart, after which the English Catholics were to rise, proclaim Mary the Queen of England, and assassinate Elizabeth. There were many arrests, hasty trials, and a few hangings. Mary Stuart was questioned, but to Walsingham's indignation she could not be proved guilty of open connivance.

"Nevertheless, madam," he urged Elizabeth, "I beg you to bring her to trial."

"Would a trial reveal any more than the recent questioning?"

"No," he said regretfully.

"Then my hands are tied, and you know it."

After a moment's thought he went on quietly, "I see now that

I was overhasty. I should have let the plot go further, given Mary Stuart full opportunity to implicate herself."

Elizabeth shuddered at the menace of his quietly spoken words. She was well aware that while Mary lived there would be no real peace in England. And she knew that if the position were reversed she herself could expect no mercy at Mary's hands; yet she thought of the captive now in sorrow rather than in anger.

"However, another opportunity will present itself," Walsingham added smoothly. "There is evidence even now that Spain, not France, will be involved in the next plot. I pray God that by holding back until Mary Stuart is fully committed I shall not endanger Your Majesty's life too greatly."

Elizabeth shuddered again. Her life *was* in danger and well she knew it, whatever Dr. Dee might have predicted about her dying in bed at Whitehall.

"One thing I insist upon," she said sharply, "Mary Stuart must not under any circumstances be tempted to betray herself."

Walsingham laughed for the first time in all the years she had known him.

"Madam, God Himself, in His own good time, will betray her."

Chapter 44

"Virginia . . ." Cecil dwelt thoughtfully on this newly coined word. "Yes indeed, madam, I like the sound of it."

"I like the sound of it myself," Elizabeth assured him.

Young Walter Raleigh, a handsome and witty courtier who had found favor in Elizabeth's eyes, had been granted a royal patent for the discovery and colonization of territories beyond the Atlantic Ocean. Having sailed some months ago, he had now sent word of his progress. England, it seemed, possessed a colony in the New World and a substantial settlement was anticipated. Moreover Raleigh, eager always to flatter Elizabeth,

had given the colony a name which would long honor her virgin state.

"So very fortunate that I'll certainly die a virgin," she laughed, "otherwise the name would have to be changed."

Cecil, having agreed with a polite laugh, began to give Elizabeth a careful and detailed account of the money now being spent on the strengthening of the coastal defenses, the building up of the navy, and the recruitment of German mercenaries for service along the Scottish border. He stressed the importance of protecting the northern countries in case Spain landed an army in Scotland.

Cecil, sixty-five now and exceedingly careworn, had just recovered from a lengthy illness. Crippled with gout as he still was, he professed himself to be as fit as a man of fifty and to prove it was taking an increasingly active part in state affairs. It was he who had suggested that Mary Stuart should be moved to a smaller and more easily guarded residence. Chartley Manor had been chosen, her household had been much reduced, and she had now been deprived of all contact with the outside world.

"In one respect this will make Walsingham's task all the harder," Cecil said, referring to this forced isolation. "There will be no letters to intercept."

"You sound almost as regretful as Walsingham himself. But I warn you, I'll not have her tempted to betray herself."

Cecil smiled blandly. "It may well be, madam, that isolation, making her desperate, will be sufficient to bring about the thing you seem so set against."

"Seem, Cecil? I *am* set against it!"

"Whatever you say, madam, but I sometimes think that a hidden self, planning shrewdly, often acts independently of the queen we know."

Elizabeth scowled at him. This was much too close to the truth for her liking, reminding her as it did of the line she had written long ago, "Since from myself my other self I turn." Could *that* woman have made her order the new restrictions for the reason now suggested by Cecil? A ridiculous thought! The last plot, that and nothing else, had made the restrictions necessary.

"Is Mary Stuart in better health these days?" she asked quickly.

"Apparently not, Your Majesty. Quite possibly she exaggerates her condition, but she certainly suffers severely from rheumatism."

Cecil then changed the subject and explained the present state of affairs in the Netherlands. He and Elizabeth had been forced to send an English army to oppose the Spanish forces in that country. Far better, they had concluded reluctantly, to make war on Philip in Europe than to wait for him to land an army either in Scotland or the south of England. Robin Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was in command of the army, but so far he had met with nothing but disaster, and Cecil was eager now for a compromise.

"What manner of compromise?" Elizabeth asked.

"I suggest the opening up of negotiations with Spain for a patched-up peace between Spain and the Netherlands."

"Approach King Philip, then. After all, the Earl of Leicester's army is costing me more money than I care to contemplate."

While the approach was being made, scorned and made again, Walsingham, having waited patiently and worked tirelessly, presented Elizabeth with incontrovertible evidence of a new plot. For a second time she heard him laugh and saw on his face what looked like a grimace of pain yet was clearly a smile of triumph.

"Mary Stuart is in my grasp at last!" he exulted.

"Begin at the beginning," Elizabeth commanded, eyeing him with distaste.

"The beginning goes back many years, madam. I have called this new plot the Babington plot, for a young man by that name fell under Mary Stuart's spell when a boy and has worshiped her ever since—most idolatrously, I must say."

Her distaste increasing, Elizabeth felt a capricious urge to shock this horrible Puritan.

"Did he sleep with her?" she asked.

Walsingham shook his head. "I have no evidence of that."

"Pray continue," she ordered him brusquely.

"Babington first came to London to study law, madam. He then traveled extensively on the Continent. That of course was some years ago. While traveling he met several of the ex-queen's supporters and agents, thereby drawing my attention to him.

When he returned from his travels he mixed freely in high society and made an effort to cultivate my acquaintance. As time passed he became convinced that he was completely hoodwinking me.

"Yet from the moment of his return he was closely watched and his secret meetings with Jesuit priests noted down. He visited the ex-queen in disguise and promised that a means of communicating with her would be found. And a short time later, the local brewer who delivers ale to Chartley Manor began to use a barrel containing a false bottom. Babington then wrote advising her to place her faith in Gilbert Gifford, a local Catholic. She had no means of knowing that Gifford was one of my own agents, nor that he himself employed the brewer. Copies were carefully taken of every letter she wrote, every letter she received. They were in code, but it was not a difficult one to break. And so, bit by bit, the details of the plot were pieced together."

"You seem to have done most excellent work," Elizabeth said grudgingly.

Walsingham's eyes glinted. "Thank you, madam. The plot itself originated here in England. Foreign aid, however, was invited and promised, Spanish aid, to be precise. As things stand, a Spanish army is to cross the Channel from the Netherlands as soon as Your Majesty and Your Majesty's ministers of state have been murdered. A repetition, in England, of the St. Bartholomew massacre is anticipated."

"My God!" Elizabeth exclaimed, her blood running cold.

"Babington in one letter spoke of himself and five others—all five being unnamed members of Your Majesty's court—as the principal assassins. In another he said that all was in readiness and asked—note this well, madam—and asked for the ex-queen's approval and consent."

"She approved, she *consented*?"

With a triumphant gesture Walsingham placed a sheet of paper before Elizabeth.

"A copy of her reply, madam."

Elizabeth took it up with trembling fingers and, reading hurriedly, her eyes finally came to rest on the five words, "I gladly give my consent."

She repeated them dully. " 'I gladly give my consent . . . ' "

"Your Majesty will note," Walsingham went on, "that she asks for the names of Babington's fellow assassins."

"Yes," Elizabeth said, "yes . . . "

"Before allowing the letter to reach its destination, I myself added the request in, I feel sure, a convincing imitation of her handwriting."

"Did you, by God!" Elizabeth laughed, shaking off the dullness.

"Unfortunately the names have not yet been supplied, and rather than take the risk of Babington and his friends striking suddenly, I advise the immediate arrest of the known conspirators. The danger, madam, is exceedingly grave."

Elizabeth agreed.

"And Mary Stuart?" she asked unnecessarily.

"She stands condemned by her own written approval and consent. Would you have her escape punishment, madam, and brought to trial only after the success of a further plot?"

"Act with your usual cunning, by all means," Elizabeth said impatiently, "but do so swiftly. You have her within your grasp, as you say. Hold her fast. I agree to her arrest and to her trial as well."

She knew that such a trial could result in only one verdict and preferred not to contemplate that verdict. She was furious, therefore, when Walsingham, taking up the copy of the fatal letter, forced her to face it squarely.

"Rest assured, madam," he said, "her head, to all intents and purposes, is already severed from her body."

"And by her own hand," Elizabeth raged, "by her own hand!"

Chapter 45

"The matter must come to an end," Cecil said wearily. "Those were Your Majesty's own words."

"The matter *has* come to an end. Mary Stuart has been tried, found guilty, and condemned to death."

"That was three months ago. The warrant is still unsigned. And Mary herself is still in Fotheringay Castle."

"So simple a thing, the signing of my name . . ."

"So simple a thing," Cecil repeated.

"A few strokes of the pen, no physical effort at all."

"The issue was clear-cut," Cecil said. "Only one sentence was possible."

Elizabeth wondered how many times she had heard Cecil utter these same words, or Walsingham, or Hatton, or Robin Dudley, or for that matter how many times she had dwelt upon them herself. Why, then, this continued hesitation? Why this stubborn refusal to sign the death warrant? Mary would have signed hers without the slightest delay. Mary had indeed gladly given her consent to the proposed Babington assassination.

"All the bishops, all the members of the Lords and Commons alike, urge Your Majesty to sign the warrant," Cecil insisted. "It would almost seem, madam, that you remain the only Protestant in England against it."

Elizabeth looked at him stonily. She wasn't against it; she was merely against that other self of hers, that self from whom, try as she might, she had not in this instance been able to turn. That barren, pitiful creature wanted Mary's blood, not because Mary was guilty of high treason, but because she had known the ecstasy of completion, had loved passionately, had borne a child.

"Is there no other way out?" she asked, repeating a question she had put to Cecil and the others many times before.

Cecil shook his head decisively. "As Your Majesty knows, no one at Fotheringay Castle is willing to administer poison. And as for Scotland," he went on, "I see no need to hesitate because of that country."

"James, in other words, is not likely to lead an army into England. Is that what you mean?"

"The Scots will howl with rage, and King James will protest volubly, but he will *not* lead an army into England."

"How can you be so sure?"

"We have his measure, madam. He feels certain that England will be his some day. He can wait. Why should he risk an un-

successful invasion and with it the loss of the English throne, perhaps even of his head?"

"A fine son for Mary, a fine king for England!" Then after a moment's silence Elizabeth added suddenly: "Could we not keep Mary in the Tower and wait for nature to take its course?"

Cecil laughed bitterly. "Nature might well be outstripped by Philip of Spain, slow and careful as he is. If he had been ready he would have invaded England when the sentence was announced, madam, on the pretext of rescuing Mary Stuart. Would you keep her alive and make his task easier, once he is fully prepared?"

"Easier, Cecil?"

"Madam—"

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean. Alive, Mary Stuart is a rallying point for the English Catholics. But if she's gone they'll fight side by side with the Protestants against any invader."

Cecil nodded. "Both factions would have but one religion then, their nationality."

"And I must make up my mind, make it up quickly, otherwise the strain will kill me and that mealy-mouthed James will have my throne years before his time. Where is the death warrant?"

"Davison has it in his keeping."

Davison, a relative of Cecil's, was one of Elizabeth's secretaries.

"Give me an hour, then send him with the warrant."

But Cecil, unwilling to chance further delay, ordered him to go to her at once. Davison placed the warrant before her on the desk. He inked the pen and offered it to her in silence. She took it and began to sign her name.

Who was signing, she wondered, her true self, or that other self? And which of them in any case was her true self? Was this signing, then, a triumph for *that* woman? Oh surely not, she thought. *That* woman would have made a shipwreck of her own conscience. The real Elizabeth Tudor was steering the only course which courage made possible.

"There," she said, her signature completed, "I have done my duty. Take it away and have it sealed."

"Am I to dispatch it, when sealed, to Fotheringay Castle?" Davison asked.

"I have done my duty," she repeated harshly. "Don't pester me!"

"To take upon myself the responsibility of dispatching the warrant—" Davison faltered.

"By God, man," she cut him short, "have it sealed and leave me in peace."

Chapter 46

Bonfires were being lighted in the streets of London. Elizabeth could see the flames springing to life as she stood at the window, her back squarely set against the ministers of state who had crowded into the room. The bell ringers were busy in all the churches. She listened as peel upon peel rang out. The bells had a merry sound, as if in celebration of a royal birth, not a royal death.

Robin Dudley approached. She recognized him by his step and, glancing to the left, saw his aging face in profile. He was newly back from Flanders with promising news. Spain had finally suffered a defeat in the Netherlands.

"We have a breathing space," she heard Robin say. "Time to prepare a warm reception for King Philip, if he dares to come to England."

"Hold your tongue," she snapped and turned her face away.

Davison, for sure, had left her in peace. Neither he nor anyone else had pestered her again since the signing of the death warrant. Davison had taken it to Cecil, and Cecil, having conferred with other members of the privy council, had sent it to Fotheringay. A scaffold had been set up, Mary had died, and now London was mad with joy. A breathing space, time to prepare a warm reception for King Philip . . .

Elizabeth turned from the window and faced her ministers.

"You took a lot upon yourselves," she said tonelessly. "You

pestered me day and night to sign. I signed. But did you seek my permission to dispatch the warrant? Did you, did you?"

She broke off and looked directly at Cecil.

"You, my Lord Burghley! Tell me how she died. Was she brave?"

"Brave enough, madam. She appeared on the scaffold in scarlet satin. She would stand out, she said, like a living flame."

"Then let the flame live a little longer. Make the funeral a goodly show also. A woman of such spirit would expect it, and merits it by heaven. A state funeral, that is my command."

Elizabeth went into mourning and ordered the court to do likewise. She cursed herself for what the world would regard as sheer hypocrisy, yet she felt that the state funeral and the mourning might in some way serve her well. She scowled on all who approached her, refused to discuss state affairs, however pressing they might be, and ate so sparingly that she grew pale and thin. She told herself that she was starving out that other self, but knew that she deceived *that* woman not at all, would never now be free of her, in fact. She remembered one of the many lines she had penned and repeated it often: "Till by the end of things it be suppressed."

She waited woodenly for the avalanche of protests from abroad. There were public demonstrations against her in France and Philip of Spain reminded everybody that Mary Stuart had named him her heir. On the other hand, Philip's commander in the Netherlands, the Duke of Parma, spoke openly of the *means* of Mary's death as regrettable rather than the death itself. A bullet in the heart or suffocation, he said, would have been a better way for one queen to rid herself of another. Bringing the law into it was anything but dignified. And the King of France echoed the same opinion.

"In other words," Elizabeth said wonderingly, "they condemn me for acting honestly. One can only assume that if I had hired an assassin, they would have absolved me from all blame. By God, their minds work more crookedly than mine ever could!"

The real trouble came from Scotland.

"The Scots want war and the treaty is in danger," Cecil told

her. "King James is at his wits' end. He fears his hand may be forced. He needs help and needs it badly."

"What do you suggest?"

"Walsingham has already assured the Scottish court that though you signed the death warrant, you signed it under extreme pressure and never intended it to be used. Give King James proof of that, and he will be able in the end to pacify his people."

"Proof . . ." Elizabeth pondered. "How can I, Cecil, *how?*"

"To prove your innocence, a scapegoat could be used."

"My innocence, my innocence! Who was guilty, Elizabeth Tudor or Mary Stuart?"

Ignoring this, Cecil said quietly, "Davison brought the warrant to me. He is the obvious scapegoat."

"To say that he acted without authority, would that be acceptable?"

"No, madam. The law must be brought into it. Davison must stand trial."

"The Star Chamber?"

"The Star Chamber."

"Poor Davison," Elizabeth said soberly. "A dull wretch, but honest."

"And loyal," Cecil added.

"Yet you would have him charged with disloyalty."

Cecil was now smiling broadly. "Yes, madam."

"My God, Cecil, are you suggesting that Davison is a *willing* scapegoat?"

"He knows what is expected of him. I need say no more than that."

Elizabeth struggled with herself for a time, but in the end she agreed that Davison should stand trial in the Star Chamber. He was found guilty of betraying the queen and her government, fined ten thousand pounds and imprisoned in the Tower, there to remain during Her Majesty's pleasure.

"And my pleasure is this," Elizabeth said: "He shall have more liberty in the Tower than I myself ever had as a prisoner there, and he shall be released when all this trouble has died down. Can he pay the fine?"

"I doubt if his personal fortune exceeds half that amount," Cecil said.

"Very well, the fine shall be remitted. Naturally I can never give him employment again, nor can anyone else. But in the course of time he shall be granted a pension equal to the yearly income he received as private secretary."

And she thought: God forbid that I should make a shipwreck of my conscience.

"Who is to replace Davison?" Cecil asked.

"As you know, I long ago marked your son Robert for secretary of state. He shall begin his training by taking Davison's place."

"I am well content, madam," Cecil said happily.

"And so you should be! Were I less generous, you, not poor Davison, would now be languishing in the Tower!"

The King of France received the news of Davison's trial with satisfaction. Honor, he indicated, had at last been satisfied. The main concern, however, had been Scotland. And there with King James in receipt of a higher pension and thus personally appeased, the clamor slowly died. As for Spain, King Philip addressed no direct communication to Elizabeth, but it was soon evident that the presence of an English army in the Netherlands, not the execution of Mary Stuart, was causing him extreme annoyance. In addition, he was acknowledged by the Pope as the rightful King of England.

"Much good *that* will do him!" Elizabeth snorted.

Nevertheless, as Walsingham informed her, Philip was now determined to hurry forward his plans for an invasion of England.

"I have studied all the information gathered by my agents in Spain and Rome," Walsingham said, placing a sheaf of papers before Elizabeth. "Here is a lengthy memorandum. I urge Your Majesty to study it with the utmost care, and I can vouch for the correctness of every detail."

Elizabeth read the memorandum many times during the following week and discussed it at length with all her advisors. Philip had reached the decision that there was only one way of completely conquering the Netherlands, and that was by first invading England. He now controlled Portugal, and there,

in Lisbon, he was assembling an army. At Lisbon also, and at many other ports, he was gathering together a large and formidable fleet of warships, an armada the size of which had never before been known. He had ordered the Duke of Parma to cease military activities in the Netherlands, increase his forces there to an army of thirty thousand men, and build a fleet of flat-bottomed boats for the crossing of the Channel.

"The proposed crossing of the Channel," Walsingham pointed out, "will only be attempted under the protection of the Spanish warships, once they are ready to sail."

"They may never sail!" Elizabeth cried.

"Madam—?"

"We have already struck Philip one feeble blow in the Netherlands; the time has now come to strike a real blow, and much nearer the heart of things. To sit and wait would be absurd, the height of folly. We can preserve ourselves by one means only, attack!"

"And the man to make it," Walsingham suggested, "is—"

"Francis Drake, by God! Who else but Francis Drake!"

VIII. Essex

Chapter 47

The young man played his final card, leaned forward, and waited tensely for Elizabeth to play hers. With a triumphant laugh she slapped it down on the table.

"You owe me another pound, you rogue!"

"If anyone's a rogue it's the Queen of England," he retorted impudently. "You played that card earlier. What puzzles me is how you got it from the table and back in your hand without my noticing."

"Your eyes are sharp, my boy, but not quite sharp enough," Elizabeth chuckled.

"You dropped a ring, and I stooped to pick it up. Was it then?"

"Who knows, my poor Essex?"

Essex pouted appealingly. "I can see I'll have to be much more wary in future. I was warned that Your Majesty strives always to win, if not by fair means, then by foul. And not only at cards, either."

Elizabeth reached out across the table and lightly boxed his ears.

"Who warned you?" she asked, smiling indulgently.

"My stepfather."

"God's precious soul, there's no greater scoundrel in the realm than Robin Dudley."

"I'm well aware of that," young Essex laughed. "I've played cards with him, too."

Elizabeth and Essex were alone together in the royal apart-

ments at Whitehall. It was long past midnight. The other courtiers had been dismissed hours ago, and finally the musicians. This was the third night in succession that she had kept Essex as her sole companion and the court was already gossiping excitedly. The queen, they were saying, had selected a new favorite and might, if the fancy took her, set him before Hatton or Raleigh, or even that favorite of favorites, the Earl of Leicester himself.

Elizabeth chuckled at the thought. Let them gossip to their hearts' content. The truth of the matter was that while waiting impatiently for news of Drake, she had grown bored with her usual companions, who in any case were much too old for her liking, and had found a new and stimulating interest in the twenty-year-old Essex.

"Shall we play again?" he asked.

"If you wish."

She watched him as he gathered the cards together. The purposeful, sure movements of his slim fingers held her fascinated. For a man, his hands were beautiful, as beautiful almost as her own. They were the hands of a scholar, just as the slight stoop of his young shoulders was that of a scholar. And yet, she reflected, though he had spent much time in study, he was skillful and gallant in the tilt-yard, an excellent tennis player, and a brave and fearless soldier. She studied his face as he concentrated on the cards.

He had a broad forehead, high and smooth, and large brown eyes which, expressive now of determination, were often as dreamy as any poet's. His lips, pursed at the moment, were full and red, while his hair, which he wore brushed back above his ears, was red-gold and silky. He was letting his beard grow, she noticed, and it was still somewhat wispy, as wispy as his mustache which, in contrast with his hair and beard, was almost yellow. Her eyes strayed to his shoulders, the broadness of which was exaggerated by the wide wings of his white satin doublet. He looked up at her with a beguiling grin.

"By all means watch me carefully! Did you notice the card I slipped under my cuff?"

"Let me see, you wretch!" She turned back the wrist frills, then seized the cards and counted them. "What a tease you are!"

Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, had succeeded to the title at the age of nine, and two years later Robin had made that despicable secret marriage with his mother. The boy had gone to Cambridge the following year and, though he had studied hard, he had also found time to get into debt. Still, at the age of fourteen the boy's diligence had been rewarded with a degree, that of Master of Arts.

Later, when he was eighteen, Robin had taken a belated interest in his stepson and had appointed him general of horse with the army in the Netherlands. Essex had achieved spectacular success in the field and greater things were expected of him in the coming struggle with Spain. Robin, bringing him to court, had already spoken of a more important army appointment.

"Your stepfather seems overanxious to push you forward at court," Elizabeth remarked. "I wonder why?"

"Your Majesty should ask Walsingham. *He* knows everything."

Elizabeth was amused. "Walsingham suspects, at all events, that my sweet Robin is eager to divert my attention from others who threaten his favored position, Raleigh at the moment being the greatest menace."

Essex laughed boyishly. "Did he—Raleigh I mean, really spread his cloak in the mud for you to walk on?"

"By God he did! I commanded it!"

Essex laughed again. "Is it really likely that my handsome face will be enough to divert your attention—from Raleigh, I mean?"

"Let us say," she replied lightly, "that it might divert my attention from the red and bloated face, the unlovely fat figure of poor, sweet Robin himself." She leaned over the table and pinched the young man's cheek. "If Alençon had been only a tenth as good-looking as you, I do believe I'd have married him. I vow I wouldn't have been able to help myself."

"God's precious soul, is the Queen of England about to demand my hand in marriage?" Essex asked comically.

Elizabeth laughed gaily. "Alençon, my boy, was at least of royal blood."

"My blood is as good as his ever was," Essex said pertly.

"Granted, you being my first cousin twice removed," Elizabeth agreed.

"A Devereux is as good as a Tudor any day!" Essex challenged.

Something in the set of his head as he spoke reminded Elizabeth of the Robin Dudley of more than thirty years ago. The impression lasted but a moment, yet left her strangely shaken by the thought that young Essex could pass for Robin's real son, and she the mother. She recalled a story which years ago had been spread about London, the story that she had given birth secretly to a child by Robin. The fault was God's, she thought bitterly, not hers or Robin's, that the story was false. She rose abruptly and moved from the table.

Essex sprang instantly to his feet.

"Have I said anything to offend you, madam?" he asked anxiously.

Elizabeth turned and looked at him broodingly. He was tall as well as handsome. To have borne such a son would have made her the proudest woman in the world.

"No, nothing," she said dully.

When Essex had gone, she sat alone at the table, playing patience absently, her mind fully occupied with the question of Spain. She had sent Drake to sea with thirty privateers, each vessel well manned and armed. He was to harry the Spanish wherever he could find them, at sea or even in their own harbors. Cecil, engaged in a last-minute and obviously hopeless attempt to make peace with Spain, had begged her to keep Drake from entering Spanish harbors. But she had only pretended to listen to Cecil and had hurriedly sent Drake private instructions to sail at once. And so, before Cecil's warning could reach him, Drake had put to sea.

"And that," Elizabeth muttered to herself, her head nodding sleepily over the table, "was three months ago." Her head fell forward on the table.

"A daring fellow, that Drake," a laughing voice was saying. "He singed the King of Spain's beard."

Elizabeth sat up quickly. The voice was Essex's. He was in the room again, his face flushed, his eyes dancing excitedly.

She stared at him stupidly. "What beard?" she mumbled, and then she came fully awake. "By God, is there news of Drake?"

"By God there is!" Essex cried. "There'll be no Spanish invasion *this* year! Drake struck at the heart of the armada. He sailed into Cadiz harbor, burned the storeships and the galleys, and sailed out again. He lost not a single ship himself, not a single man. In his own words, madam, he singed the King of Spain's beard."

Elizabeth rose shakily to her feet.

"Dear heaven," she whispered emotionally, "if only I could have sailed with Drake!"

Chapter 48

It seemed to her as if she had been sitting at her desk for days on end, neither eating, sleeping, nor taking rest of any sort, yet even so she felt, not weariness, but a mounting exhilaration.

"This," said Walsingham, placing another sheet before her, "is a memorandum of King Philip's claim to the throne of England."

She read the paper contemptuously. Philip based his claim, quite apart from the fact that Mary Stuart had named him her heir, on his descent from the two daughters of John of Gaunt, Philippa Plantagenet, who had married a king of Portugal, and Catherine Plantagenet, who had married a king of Castille. And thus through his descent from the House of Lancaster, he was, he asserted, the rightful King of England.

"An open declaration of war," Walsingham remarked. "Nothing will induce him to negotiate peace now. Drake hurt his pride too much last year."

"A touchy appendage, that beard of his," Elizabeth chuckled. "Well, what other business have we?"

"A letter from the King of Scotland, madam."

"Is the wretched James asking for more money? By God, if he is I'll reduce his pension by half!"

"King James is far too concerned with King Philip's claim to the English throne to worry about money," Walsingham assured

her. "He writes that a Spanish army must not be permitted to land in England. He even promises Scottish aid, if the situation becomes desperate."

"The main thing is that a Spanish army must not be permitted to land in Scotland. For the rest, we can manage without James. Well, what next?"

Walsingham placed another memorandum before her.

"This, madam, is a careful estimate of the strength of King Philip's armada. It includes also an estimate of the Duke of Parma's land forces in the Netherlands. They are substantially unchanged in the last year."

"Is this mighty armada restored to its former strength?"

"Apparently. In all, there are at least a hundred and fifty vessels now ready to sail."

Elizabeth pored over the memorandum. A possible sixty large warships headed Walsingham's list. This in itself was a staggering fleet, and there was an equal number of merchant vessels, much smaller, but fully armed. In addition there were many galleys, pinnaces and caravels, while an army of twenty thousand soldiers was waiting to embark, as well as a smaller army of courtiers, government officials, and priests.

"Does Philip himself intend to sail with the armada?" she asked.

"No, madam. He proposes to follow when his government officials have taken over the state, his priests the church, and his courtiers have set up a court to receive him."

Elizabeth glanced again at the memorandum. "How many ships of war have we to set against Philip's mighty armada? Yes, yes, I know the number! Eighty at the most, and only twelve of any reasonable size, and of that twelve a mere four no larger than the smallest Spanish galleon. But what of it? Do I sit here trembling with fear? By heaven, I don't!"

Walsingham coughed fastidiously. "Let us now turn, madam, to our own military strength. We have at Tilbury, where King Philip proposes to land his army, a force of twenty-three thousand men. In addition, the militia now gathering in London from the midland counties—"

"Enough!" Elizabeth interrupted. "I think I've earned a rest. A little gaiety, that's what I need! A ball—I'll celebrate Philip's

defeat in advance with a ball! I wonder if that dear boy Essex can dance the galliard as well as Chris Hatton?"

She found that he could not, but sure that he would improve with practice, she danced with him exclusively, enjoying the heavy scowls on the faces of Hatton and Raleigh. It was now July twelfth in the year 1588, a year which Dr. Dee had foreseen as the most important and glorious of her whole reign. She had faith in the astrologer, but greater faith in herself and her people, all strongly united now, both Protestants and Catholics.

During the next few days she sent personal messages to Howard, her admiral, and Drake, her vice admiral; she conferred many times with Robin, commander of the army at Tilbury, attended council meetings, and visited Cecil, too ill to leave his bed at Burghley House. On returning to Whitehall from one such visit, she learned that the armada had finally put to sea. A chain of signal fires had been prepared, and on the twenty-ninth, their blaze warned that the Spanish vessels had been sighted off Lizard Point.

"What of Howard and Drake?" she demanded.

It was infuriating that the fire signals could bring no message other than the prearranged warning, that she must wait, meanwhile suffering a vast impatience, for the arrival of a courier from Plymouth.

He came at last saying that Howard and Drake, fearing for a time that they might be bottled up in Plymouth Harbor, had put hurriedly to sea, and with their smaller, swifter ships were already attacking the sluggish Spanish galleons.

"This is neither good news nor bad," Elizabeth complained. "Am I to wait here day by day, biting my nails, for the story of Philip's defeat to reach me bit by bit?"

She sent for Robin and looked at him coldly.

"Why, my lord, are you not at Tilbury?"

"My continued presence there is scarcely needed, yet. Even if the armada sailed unmolested up the Channel it would be days before it formed a juncture with Parma's forces at Dunkirk."

"The armada will never reach Dunkirk, by God!"

"In that case, dear Bess, we may as well go off to Kenilworth for a few days' hunting."

Elizabeth melted at once. There was something of the old youthful dash about Robin's manner, disgusting sight that he was with his red face and heavy stomach.

"I'll go to Tilbury myself," she said excitedly. "I can't be there in the Channel with Drake, but by God I *can* place myself at the head of my army!"

Walsingham, heading the council in Cecil's absence, pleaded with her to remain at Whitehall. "Madam, in the absence of news, not knowing how the issue is going—"

Refusing to listen, Elizabeth rode out of London with Robin Dudley on her right, his stepson Essex on her left. It was a bright August day, not too hot, and the sun flashed and sparkled on the armor of her attendants and on the jewels, a rich display, which she wore on her fingers, wrists, and round her neck. Beneath her gown, for she scorned a simple riding costume, she wore a farthingale of such enormous proportions that sitting her horse called for as much valor, she swore, as chasing the Spaniards up the Channel. A troop of horse, drawn from the militia, led the royal entourage; her ladies, servants, and baggage mules followed immediately behind her, and another troop of horse brought up the rear.

She spent the night at a house three miles from Tilbury camp and, rising early the next morning, dressed carefully for her visit to the army. Intent on making a brave and warlike showing, she caused a steel corselet to be strapped about her breast, the tightness of which made the farthingale more cumbersome than ever. Thus arrayed, and wearing the reddest of her wigs, she mounted a gaily caparisoned charger. Robin and Essex again rode on either side of her, a court official went in front carrying the sword of state and a handsome page followed proudly bearing her white-plumed helmet.

On entering the camp she passed slowly through the ranks of the army which had been drawn up in full battle array for the royal inspection. The weather was blustery now, with a southwesterly blowing. Countless times she reined in her horse to talk with the men, though her words were drowned by the lusty cheering which echoed and reechoed all about her. She saw tears in many eyes and, fighting back her own, called for silence.

"My dear and loving people," she cried, "there are those who

would have held me back this day, fearing the Spaniards on the one hand, the assassin's sword on the other. To the devil with such paltry caution!"

She paused for a moment only.

"I am come among you now to lay down for my God, for my kingdom and, for my people, my honor and my blood." Her voice rose richly. "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king—and a king of *England*, by God!"

Tumultuous cheering followed her words, cheering which made her resolve without hesitation to remain with the army so long as the threat of invasion hung over the land.

She hung on at Tilbury waiting for news, and though at times, as rumors poured in of a Spanish victory, she grew desperate, she never betrayed her feelings. She went out among the soldiers again and again, joking with them, slapping them on the back, asking after their wives and sweethearts, matching their oaths with her own goodly reserve of expletives.

Within a week news came that the English fleet had the advantage of the wind. Moreover, the English captains, so well acquainted with the Channel, were scarcely hampered by the fog which now enveloped it. While the running sea battle continued, the story went, fine Spanish feathers were being plucked out one by one.

"By God," Elizabeth laughed, "let me get my hands on Philip himself and I'll pluck out the hairs of his beard one by one!"

Reports began to flow in rapidly now. Closing in and drawing off at will, the swift little ships, firing three or four shots to every single Spanish shot, were sinking the galleons, driving them ashore, snapping at their dignified heels until finally a battered, depleted armada was forced to drop anchor in Calais Roads.

"And now, what?" Elizabeth exulted.

She was warned gravely that the Spanish losses, when one took into account the total strength of the armada, had been negligible, that the danger was as great as ever.

Yet hard on this came the news that Howard had forced an engagement where previously he had merely led a harrying chase. Drake and Hawkins and Frobisher had sent fire ships in

among the anchored galleons, whereupon the Spanish admiral had hastily put to sea again. At dawn the next morning the English ships had closed in and the engagement had lasted all day.

It could not yet be said how many Spanish ships had been destroyed by fire in Calais Roads, or how many had been sunk or forced ashore in the engagement, but it *could* be said that the armada, though still a powerful force, was trapped by the weight of English ships in the narrow Dover strait and was sailing north before the wind.

"A landing in Scotland, perhaps?" Elizabeth asked, and thought of James.

Walsingham, to whom she put the question, had his answer ready. King Philip was always a careful planner, he said. Not anticipating defeat, he had nevertheless prepared for it. His orders were precise. The armada, if trapped, was to return to Spain by way of the North Sea, the Orkney Islands and the Irish Sea.

"The armada is defeated, then?" she asked excitedly.

"Who can say, madam? Our ships are in pursuit, but ammunition and supplies are surely running out. The most I myself am prepared to admit is that Parma has no hope now of invading England."

"And the least I myself am prepared to admit," she retorted, "is that England has achieved a victory that will live on forever in the minds and hearts of Englishmen!"

She rode forth once more to review the army. The sky had clouded heavily. Great drops of rain were falling. She was quickly forced to take shelter, and while sheltering watched the rapid approach of the storm. In high spirits she went out again, and, soon drenched to the skin, watched the lightning and listened to the thunder in an ecstasy of delight.

"*Our* ammunition may be running out, but God is still well armed!" she cried.

She returned to London the next day. The storm had passed on a northward course, the merest of blustery showers compared with the fury it gathered when striking the armada off the Orkney Islands. Of the original Spanish vessels, only a third returned to Spanish waters. Thirty had been lost in battle; the

rest had either been sunk or wrecked on the coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

"And our own losses, Walsingham?"

"Not a single ship, madam."

"Incredible!"

Chapter 49

"A goodly sight!" Robin Dudley exclaimed, gazing with relish at the plump roasted chicken which had been placed before him.

Elizabeth glanced at him in mock severity. "Just look at the man! Drooling at the mouth already, eyes glazed as if in a deep trance!"

A ripple of laughter ran round the table, but Robin, reaching for his wine, paid no heed.

Elizabeth was spending a few days at Hampton Court and had brought with her only a handful of courtiers. She was dining now with Robin and Essex, William Cecil, his son Robert, and Chris Hatton, who had lately become lord chancellor. These, with no women to annoy her, made up the company at the royal table.

She glanced round the dining hall. Less favored courtiers sat at smaller tables and with them her maids of honor. Musicians played softly, servants hurried back and forth over the rush-covered floor from the dining tables to the side tables, and behind her chair stood her personal cupbearer.

Small as the gathering was, the court had never been so gay, the display of clothes and jewels so magnificent. Each courtier strove to outdo the other, and each lady too, but all most mindful of the fact that none must outdo Her Majesty the Queen.

Her eyes fell on Walsingham who, entering late, was seating himself at one of the smaller tables. She noticed that he tottered like a very old man. He, too, had been ill, and the doctors, unable to cure him—he suffered a recurrent fever—had told her privately that he might not have long to live. They had said much the same about William Cecil, had informed her

that Chris Hatton had a weak heart and had predicted that Robin, more choleric and portly than ever, might well die of a seizure. In this year of triumph, she was surrounded, it seemed, by impending death. Escaping from this gloomy thought, she looked fondly at Essex, the gem of them all. She was as healthy as he, and as youthful too, by heaven!

"Walsingham tells me," Cecil was saying, "that King Philip now spends all his time in prayer and meditation and refuses to receive any but his confessor."

"Even that must dismay him, for what has he to confess but failure?" Elizabeth laughed.

All at the royal table echoed her laughter heartily. Hatton turned and repeated her remark to the occupants of the nearest table and soon everybody in the dining hall was rocking with laughter.

"King Philip made only one comment when receiving the news," Cecil went on. "He said that in God's actions personal reputations were neither lost nor gained."

"God Himself must laugh at such abject resignation," Elizabeth chuckled.

Hatton again repeated her remark and more laughter echoed through the hall. She gloated over it, yet looked upon them all, with the exception of Essex, as miserable sycophants. He, as spirited in his own way as she was in hers, showed an inclination at times to defy her. This was most refreshing. Naturally she boxed his ears when he went too far, but playfully, and told him to go to the devil, but amiably. Not that he had as yet ventured too far in any important issue, nor could he, for he held no official place either at court or in her government. He was, at most, her favorite of favorites, and that for both their sakes, she thought, he must certainly remain.

"Robin," she barked, "you're drinking far too much wine!" She glanced at his plate. "Is that your second chicken?"

"My third, madam," Robin admitted sheepishly.

"Damn you, Robin, you seemed determined to eat yourself into the grave and me into bankruptcy!"

Essex laughed. "My stepfather long ago gained a reputation for eating and drinking equaled only by that of Your Majesty's late and noble father."

"Be that as it may, he long ago gained an even greater roundity," Elizabeth said. "I swear my father's armor would stifle him. If he wants to live to a ripe old age he should eat as I do, sparingly, and drink only ale, for wine, that sickly stuff from abroad, befuddles the mind."

Robin raised his goblet. "God save the queen!"

Elizabeth laughed wickedly. "And the queen, my sweet Robin, will with God's help do her best to save *you*. What you need is more exercise, you unspeakable glutton. You, Essex, send word to the stables. An afternoon in the saddle will shake up all our livers."

"You rode us to a standstill this morning," Robin protested.

"I'll do it again this afternoon!"

Robin rose regretfully from the table. "But think of the expense. To ride all afternoon will only increase my appetite. Supper will be a costly meal."

"Then I shall add a few pounds to the vast amount you already owe the royal exchequer."

Robin sighed elaborately. "Not even wine befuddles the royal brain."

Elizabeth kept him in the saddle for three full hours, jeering when he lagged behind. On returning to the palace, she outpaced all her companions but Essex, and even he, she saw gleefully, was flagging. She marveled that at fifty-four she should have so much energy. She had danced and played cards till midnight last night, had been at her desk at seven this morning, had gone riding at nine after a hasty breakfast, had walked in the gardens for an hour before dinner, arguing with Hatton about the merits of Boccaccio's stories, which she thought funny rather than vulgar, and was looking forward avidly now to another evening of dancing and card playing. There was no doubt about it, she would live to be a hundred and even then dance the galliard with the best of them.

"Since Your Majesty is in such marvelous high spirits," Essex remarked, when helping her to dismount, "I feel sure that my small request will be instantly granted."

"Make it and find out, you confident wretch!"

"Madam, I want you to forgive my mother and receive her at court."

"I'll do neither," Elizabeth said lightly.

"Forgiveness scarcely matters, but the poor creature has set her heart on being received."

"Persist in this and you'll make me very angry," she said, still mildly.

A stubborn look crossed the young man's face. "I have already invited my mother to present herself at Hampton Court."

Instantly Elizabeth matched stubbornness with stubbornness. "How humiliating for her to be turned away."

Essex flushed angrily. "Your Majesty is bent on making a fool of me!"

This, defiance of a new sort, was anything but refreshing. He needed to be taught a lesson, and a sharp one. Robin and the others were now dismounting close at hand in the courtyard. Cecil and Walsingham, both bleary-eyed after a lengthy nap, were coming out of the palace to greet her. She waited until all were within earshot, and then in her harshest voice uttered a brief command: "Get out of my sight, Essex!"

His flush deepened; he glared at her angrily.

"Would you have me call the guard?"

He touched the hilt of his sword. "I know how to defend myself, madam!"

And with that he turned on his heels and stalked away, leaving Elizabeth with the feeling that she, not Essex, had been taught a sharp lesson. She forced a laugh of unconcern and offered Robin her arm.

At supper Essex appeared, as confident as ever. Elizabeth ignored him and, commanding her ladies to do likewise, danced first with Robin, then with Hatton, and then with Robin again. She was beginning to feel quite sentimental about Robin, and the more the lonely, watching Essex scowled, the more sentimental she grew. Robin pranced and panted, failing utterly to match his step with hers, but what did *that* matter? Old favorites were the best, and Robin was the oldest of them all. It was surely time she rewarded him for his services in the war with Spain. She had granted pensions to Admiral Howard and several others. A pension for sweet Robin? Great heavens, not that! Too much money was being squandered on pensions; she must think of something that would cost her nothing.

Tired at last of dancing, Elizabeth called for the cards and after an hour of play dismissed all but Robin. By this time Essex had drifted away, and that was a pity, for she had intended him to witness fully the triumph of the oldest favorite over the newest, who in any case was now no favorite at all. It touched her to see the surprise on Robin's face when she called for a late additional supper and invited him to eat his fill. With the food and wine set out on a small side table she dismissed the servants and waited on him herself. She even partook of a little food herself, most sparingly of course, and poured for herself a goblet of wine.

"Have a care, dear Bess!" Robin laughed.

"The wine can do me no harm," she said. "My mind is befuddled already with memories of the past."

"Pleasant ones, I hope."

"Since I refuse to dwell on the bad memories, the pleasantest in the world, sweet Robin." And she quoted some lines written by her father, which she had always liked:

*"Pastime with good company
I love, and shall until I die.
Grouch who list, but none deny,
So God be pleased, thus live will I."*

"Thus live will I!" Robin echoed, raising his goblet.

Elizabeth raised her own and drank deeply. She remembered that once, when ill and delirious, she had wanted to make Robin lord protector, but since she was certainly in the best of health, with no intention of dying for many a year, a lord protector would be ludicrous now.

"What is the highest office a monarch can bestow upon a subject?" she asked.

"Well, now—"

"Wait! I know! Actually, I find this wine stimulating, *not* befuddling! How would you like to be lieutenant general of England?"

Robin dropped his goblet. "My dear Bess—!"

"And of Ireland too, of course. Lieutenant general of England and Ireland."

"You must be joking," he gasped. "No English monarch has ever given a subject so much power."

Quite carried away, Elizabeth cried, "In my heart you have always been my husband. Why, then, should I not share my power with the husband of my heart?"

Steadying himself, Robin leaned over the table and peered into her goblet.

"Empty, I see. You'll regret this in the morning, Bess."

Elizabeth jumped to her feet. "How furious you make me! Tomorrow I'll set Cecil to work, drawing up the patent of office. The least you can do is thank me! Come, down on your knees, down on your knees! And gracefully, man, gracefully!"

Robin fell to his knees, not in the least gracefully, but Elizabeth chose to see him as a youth again, slim, handsome, and full of grace.

"There is as much astonishment in my gratitude as gratefulness," he said emotionally. "And more than either, a deep humility. I have often dreamed of high office—even hoped to take Cecil's place. But never did I dream that Your Majesty would create for me an office unknown in England and place me with a stroke of the pen above Cecil and Walsingham and Hatton, above *all* of them." He looked up at her with shining eyes. "My heart is too full for mere words. I swear that as long as I live, I will never dishonor this, the highest of all great honors."

"Get up, Robin," Elizabeth said harshly. "Another word and you'll have us both in tears."

She woke next morning with a headache. She also woke remembering something Robin had said: No English monarch has ever given a subject so much power. She must have been crazy! And simply because she had quarreled with Essex! A fine way of teaching him a lesson! She decided at once against ordering Cecil to draw up the patent. However, when of his own accord her elderly advisor brought up the subject (Robin had been quick to tell him of the promise) and pleaded with her not to embark on so great a folly, she faced him stubbornly.

"Enough!" she raged. "The court returns to Whitehall today. Draw up the patent. Present it for my signature tomorrow morning."

Hatton was the next to plead with her, then Walsingham, both pointing out that if she fell ill at any time a lieutenant general could seize full power, dismiss her present councilors and set up a council of his own. Worse, if she suddenly died he would control the government and, since she had not yet definitely named an heir, set up a puppet king of his own.

"Nothing is less likely to influence me than this talk of illness and death!" she shouted.

The next morning when Cecil presented himself at Whitehall he carefully avoided the subject and tried to distract her by discussing the advisability of disbanding the army. Under her orders Robin had gone straight from Hampton Court to Tilbury to complete the task.

"The cost of maintaining an army in peacetime is too big a drain on the exchequer," Elizabeth said.

"We are still at war with Spain, madam."

"The war can be carried on at sea."

"Your Majesty has already ordered a reduction in the naval forces."

"With the armada smashed, my dear Cecil, Drake's privateers will be more than sufficient for raids on Spanish shipping."

"The council holds the contrary opinion."

"What would you have me do, then? Summon Parliament and in the midst of the nation's rejoicing demand supply through taxation?"

"A new tax, I admit, would be most unpopular."

"Englishmen are queer fish," Elizabeth reflected thoughtfully. "They would far rather risk their money in a gamble than pay tax and, losing it that way, would count it well lost. And *there*," she laughed, "is the solution! Let the war be continued by privateering ventures. Think what I myself gained from Drake's voyage round the world. For every hundred pounds I invested, or gambled, I received the handsome return of £4,700. Advertise that fact and hundreds of thousands will pour in, Spanish plunder will find its way to London and poor Philip will be more than ever at the mercy of the international moneylenders."

"A tempting alternative," Cecil admitted.

"Now give me the Earl of Leicester's patent of office."

"I have not yet drawn it up, madam," Cecil said evasively.

"And why not, pray?"

"Much thought is needed, Your Majesty. Unguided by any valid precedent, I am faced with many ticklish difficulties in the creation of such a document."

"I see your game, Cecil! You feel that if you delay long enough I might have the good sense to change my mind."

"The good sense?" Cecil echoed softly.

"Damn you, the words slipped out of their own accord!"

"Indicating, I suspect, that Your Majesty in the end will indeed change your mind."

The next day Elizabeth received a letter from Robin. News had reached him, he said, that once more it had been proved that her royal word was not to be relied upon. He was bitterly disappointed, deeply disillusioned. He regretted that he had been so great a fool as to waste so much emotion thanking her. It was clear enough, he added, that she had been carried away by her quarrel with Essex. It disgusted him that she, a woman who would shortly be fifty-five, should drool at the mouth for a boy who was thirty-four years her junior. He warned her that Essex was unstable, charming one moment, hateful the next, as stubborn as she and as deceitful too. He concluded that he himself was about to leave for Kenilworth, there to remain in complete retirement.

Elizabeth tore up the letter and sent for Walsingham.

"Who informed the Earl of Leicester that I had changed my mind?" she demanded furiously. "Was it you, or Hatton, or Lord Burghley? Or all three of you?"

"He received a gentle hint, no more, madam. We judged it kinder to prepare him for the inevitable."

She dismissed Walsingham. Well, it *was* inevitable, *now*. Robin himself had given her all she needed in the way of an excuse. Let him remain at Kenilworth for the rest of his life and rot there. She never wanted to see him again.

However on the fourth of the month, three days before her birthday, Elizabeth received another letter from him. He was on his way to Kenilworth, he wrote, and had had time to regret his hastiness. He begged her forgiveness. A burning fever, which had attacked him at Tilbury, was upon him again. It had every appearance now of a continual fever. There was nothing like

the fear of death to fill a sinner with repentance, he concluded, though he was ready to admit that he might be the very devil again, once a cure had been effected.

Softening toward him once more, Elizabeth resolved to visit Kenilworth and there celebrate with him their joint birthday. But once she had announced her intention, the physicians warned her that Robin's fever was contagious, and fear gripped her heart. It was all very well to believe that one would live to a ripe old age. A queen, however, must take special care of herself.

During the day her alarm extended to a growing concern for Robin himself. Never before had he spoken about death. He was the sort of man who would only say that he was dying when he knew instinctively that he was. She sent a messenger to Kenilworth to inquire about his state of health, but before the man had had time to return to Whitehall, word came that Robin, too ill to travel farther, had broken his journey at Cornbury Park.

And then, on the eve of her birthday, Cecil came silently into the royal apartments, laid some state papers on her desk and, still without speaking, walked slowly to the window. Staring at him in horror, Elizabeth recalled that the court had been shrouded in gloom during the whole day, that her ladies had looked at her with frightened eyes and servants had hurried from her presence.

"Cecil!" she said sharply.

Cecil turned and limped back to the desk.

"Everyone else is afraid to face you, madam," he said, "so it is left to me to break the news."

"When did Robin die?" she asked woodenly.

"Two days ago at Cornbury Park."

Cecil stole softly from the room, but even before he had closed the door behind him, the woodenness had passed and Elizabeth was weeping bitterly. She fought against the weakness and, fighting, wept all the more. The past came crowding about her. As if it were only yesterday, she remembered Robin swearing to prove himself sincere, even if it meant betraying his own father. She remembered him in the Tower, sharing her imprisonment, bringing her news, giving her new heart.

She saw him as a boy of sixteen, saw him so clearly that he might have been in the room at her side. He was asking her permission to marry Amy Robsart, and she was refusing, saying, "I won't give you my permission, now or ever." Well, Robin *had* married Amy Robsart, Amy had died and years later, because of jealousy, he had married Essex's mother.

Clinging to this, an act of gross disloyalty, Elizabeth remembered other similar acts and gradually, with grief still tormenting her, she convinced herself that she was weeping in anger, not in sorrow. Of course she was! Years and years ago she had sworn never to weep again except in anger, and by heaven, she had kept full faith with herself.

She remained alone for the rest of the day, having issued an order that there would be no birthday celebrations on the morrow. Essex tried to see her during the evening, but she kept her door locked against him and the rest of the court. He tried again the following morning, and again she turned him away. Cecil then sent her a copy of Robin's will. It had been drawn up just before his death, the last time he had put pen to paper. Dry-eyed now, Elizabeth sat stiffly at her desk and studied it with exaggerated care.

"And first of all," she read, "it is my duty to remember before and above all persons, my most dear and most gracious sovereign, whose creature under God I have been, and who hath been a most bountiful and princely mistress unto me. . . ."

She laughed harshly. Here, for sure, was a sarcastic Robin!

"And as it was my greatest joy in my lifetime to serve her," she read on, "so is it not unwelcome to me, it being the will of God, to die and end my life in her service. And yet, even though I am not able to make any piece of recompense for her great goodness, so will I present unto her the token of an humble and faithful heart as the least that I could ever send her . . ."

Again she laughed harshly. He had, it seemed, left her his best wishes!

"And with this prayer withal, that it may please Almighty God to make her the oldest prince that ever reigned in England, the godliest, the worthiest, the most virtuous, that she may indeed be a blessed mother to her people and to her church . . ."

Elizabeth felt the tears spring to her eyes, but checking them

she searched frantically for more evidence of sarcasm. "The most virtuous"—that was evidence enough, damn him to hell! She read the rest of Robin's will and found that, in addition to his good wishes and prayers, he had left her some costly jewelry, a table diamond set in smaller diamonds and a rope of six hundred pearls.

It was difficult now, with the tears flowing so fast, to convince herself that they still sprang from an angry heart. Furious with herself, and with Robin for causing it all, she sought with renewed frenzy for a means of expressing an anger as great as any she had ever felt in her life. Money, she thought, Robin died owing me money! She sent at once for Walsingham.

"The late Earl of Leicester," she said grimly, "died in debt to the state. The state therefore has first claim on his estate. Issue a royal distringas on his personal effects, otherwise his wretched widow will make off with all his possessions."

Walsingham said bleakly, "The widow, I understand, was conducting a most unbecoming love affair with Sir Christopher Blount and will surely marry him."

"How disgusting! All the more reason to hasten the distringas!"

But when Walsingham had gone about this business Elizabeth was seized by an even greater and more painful fit of weeping from which, try as she might, she could find no relief. Exhausted at last, she took up Robin's will and held it close against her breast.

"It was sorrow all the time," she whispered. "I admit it now, sweet Robin. Sorrow and nothing else."

Chapter 50

"Master of horse is all very well," Essex said pettishly, "but am I to remain just that for the rest of my life?"

"Your stepfather held the appointment without complaint for thirty years," Elizabeth told him amiably.

Essex laughed scornfully. "Without complaint, by God!"

"Without complaint," Elizabeth insisted, for during the two years since his death Robin had become a paragon of virtue, a demigod who had never been known to complain, show jealousy, intrigue against her or ever at any time provoke a quarrel.

"You made him a privy councilor," Essex pointed out.

"Ah, so you want a seat on the council, you wretch!"

"And with it, Walsingham's vacant office. A small thing to ask, in all conscience!"

Walsingham had died at last. Though Elizabeth had never liked the man, she had never underrated his ability and she knew that it would be difficult to replace him. She also knew that Essex, clever as he was, was not the man best fitted to become her secretary of state.

"Robert Cecil is strutting about already," Essex glowered. "He expects his father to thrust him into Walsingham's shoes, and you, no doubt, will toe the line, as usual."

"I refuse to quarrel with you," Elizabeth said lightly. "Why should I take the slightest notice of your request when your manner of making it declares you quite unworthy of so high an office?"

"It was more a demand than a request," he said sulkily.

"So I suspected, you spoiled brat."

There had been many such scenes during the last two years, Elizabeth reflected unhappily. On one occasion his feeling of frustration had made him really ill; he had spent two weeks in bed and had only recovered when she had granted him his wish. She couldn't remember what it was. Something quite trifling, no doubt; but there was nothing trifling about this new demand-request.

"Robert Cecil shall have the position," she said crisply. "His father has trained him for years with that end in view."

Essex laughed airily. "I see I must bow to Your Majesty's wishes."

"How very wise of you!"

"All the same, Robert Cecil had better watch his step. And his father too. The old man will die, sooner or later. All the old courtiers are tottering toward their graves. Youth will soon predominate at court. Many of the younger ones are looking to me already to give them a lead, and by God they won't be

disappointed! I intend to become a real power in the land, whether or not I remain officially no more than master of the horse."

"And who is strutting now, pray?"

"I make no idle boast, madam!"

"Ah, you have a mind to rule my kingdom."

"By God I have!"

"Then by God be careful to watch your own step. Touch my scepter, however lightly, and I'll make you the most pitiful little fellow in the realm."

Essex laughed in sudden gaiety. "In a word, the queen will box my ears!"

When he was gay there was no resisting him, and Elizabeth matched his laughter with gay laughter of her own.

"More soundly than ever before, my boy!"

She was the doting mother again—or was it the admiring mistress? So difficult to say, since he was a son one moment, a lover the next.

"With all as merry as a marriage bell between us," Essex said impishly, "this may be as good a time as any to bring up the subject of my debts."

Elizabeth grew sour immediately. "I advanced you three thousand pounds only a little time ago."

"And now, heaven help us both, I find that I owe various people a matter of twenty thousand."

"Small chance then that I will be repaid!"

Essex sighed heavily. "And small chance *I* have, or so your tone of voice suggests, of gaining further help." He hunched up his shoulders; he became a comical picture of dejection. "I had hoped that the richest woman in the world would lend the poorest man in the world another paltry three thousand."

"And after that, another and another! I won't be trifled with in the matter of money."

"Your Majesty is about to demand unconditional repayment?"

There was laughter in his voice, but this time Elizabeth refused to respond to it. The richest woman in the world? That was nonsense, but what she had she intended to keep, and what was owing to her she intended to claim. Instantly she became a shrewd woman of business.

"What possessions have you, Essex?"

"A few fine clothes, a piece or two of jewelry, my inheritance in land, a few manors here and there."

"Thank you!" Elizabeth said promptly. "I have always admired Keyston Manor."

"Are you serious?" Essex gasped.

"By God I am! Have the transfer drawn up, and quickly, or I'll issue a royal distringas."

His face paled and without another word he turned on his heels and stamped from the room.

As day followed day and he appeared no more at court, she began to regret her harshness. She grew increasingly anxious, fearing that he might have left the country. Presently she learned that he was hunting at Keyston Manor; she also learned, for Cecil himself presented her with the documents, that the manor was now hers.

"Then the wretched Essex is trespassing!" she cried gleefully. "Have him brought back to court."

"Under guard, madam?"

"Naturally!"

By now, since certain crown leases had come up for renewal, she had thought of a way of helping Essex without financial embarrassment to herself, but first she intended to lecture him roundly—he had flaunted her authority by leaving court without royal permission—and for a little while longer keep him on tenterhooks.

He returned eventually, but not under guard, for he had defended himself to good purpose with some rather pretty swordplay. There was even prettier swordplay on his arrival at Whitehall, except that on this occasion he had faced an opponent more skillful than himself. It was Hatton who brought the news, Hatton with a vindictive smile on his face.

"A duel? Essex fought a duel?" she demanded.

"With young Charles Blount, madam."

"What provoked it, Chris?"

"Your Majesty was the subject of the quarrel."

"Was I indeed! Who was the challenger?"

"My lord Essex. Your Majesty will remember that young Blount showed such skill in the tiltyard that you gave him the queen from your prized set of gold chessmen."

"Ah, Essex heard of it and was resentful!"

"Obviously, madam. Blount tied the queen to his arm. Essex saw it and flew into a rage. As a result he suffered a wound in the thigh."

"A serious one?" Elizabeth asked in alarm.

"He can still walk."

"Send him to me at once!"

When he limped into her presence, she laughed scornfully. She said there was nothing she loved more than two hot-blooded youngsters fighting over her. She was disappointed, however, that her favorite had not acquitted himself with greater skill.

"Let us hope," she concluded, "that Charlie Blount has taught you better manners. Now kiss my hand, beg my forgiveness, and promise to behave yourself with more decorum in future."

To her surprise, and somewhat to her disappointment, he did so with alacrity. Then she told him that she was prepared to help him in the sorry matter of his mountainous debts by selling him a lease which would give him the monopoly of the wine trade. "Even a poor businessman like you will find it impossible not to make a fortune out of wine."

Essex smiled winningly. "If Your Majesty were in a really forgiving mood, the lease would be a gift, not a purchase."

"Nonsense," Elizabeth countered. "This is a question of business. You must allow me some small profit for myself, you rogue."

The court had been a deadly place during his absence; now the old gaiety returned, even though Essex teased her almost beyond endurance by flirting with her ladies, turn by turn, sometimes with two or three at a time. She boxed their ears, cursed him viciously, and threatened that when his wine lease came up for renewal it would not be honored.

"Would you have me take life seriously, madam?" he asked pertly.

"Seriously?"

"I mean, would it please you more if I selected just one pretty girl and became a respectable married man?"

"I forbid you to marry, Essex. *That* is an order."

"It sounds more like a challenge!"

"Marry, you fool, and I'll banish you forever."

"That, too, sounds like a challenge. How fortunate for me that I took unto myself a wife before Your Gracious Majesty thought to forbid it."

"Are you serious, Essex?" Elizabeth asked shakily.

She could see that he was; she could also see that in spite of his bravado he was afraid that he might have gone too far this time.

"A short spell in the Tower, is that to be my punishment?" he asked jauntily.

"Which of my ladies have you married?"

"I married a Puritan's daughter. Since I couldn't have Walsingham's office, I thought it amusing to have Walsingham's daughter."

Elizabeth laughed shortly. To her surprise, her anger was fading, giving place to a comical relief. Just think of it, a Puritan's daughter! It would serve Essex right if his wife induced him to spend hours and hours each day on his knees in earnest prayer.

"Was it an act of spite?" she asked.

Essex nodded. "Forced upon me by my beloved mistress, the queen."

Elizabeth was instantly jealous again. "Is your wife with child already?"

"No, madam."

"Where have you housed her?"

"She is at present living with my mother."

"And there she shall remain, for I'll never receive her at court!"

"So much the better for her, dear madam."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because then she will have no chance at all of growing jealous of my faithfulness to the queen."

"Faithfulness indeed, you wretch!"

Essex kissed her hand. "Have we not, you and I, a marriage transcending all other marriages? A marriage of spirit and mind, a marriage which no wife could ever fracture? A marriage which makes us of the same age and keeps us ageless?"

And keeps us ageless! Elizabeth was defeated and she knew it. Her heart glowed with happiness. She paused for a brief

moment to ask herself if Essex was sincere, or merely deeply cunning, but that seemed to matter not at all. And keeps us ageless! A priceless phrase! A trap, perhaps, but irresistible.

"Nevertheless," she said quickly, "the new Countess of Essex shall never come to court."

Chapter 51

"The tooth must come out, madam," Sir Christopher Hatton pronounced.

"Nonsense!" Elizabeth gasped.

She was shocked, indignant and hurt, and very much afraid.

"Nonsense!" she repeated blusteringly.

Hatton examined the rotten tooth again. "I can do no more to relieve the pain, madam. It must come out."

"What an uncompromising bully you are," Elizabeth shouted resentfully. "Indeed, my court is packed with bullies. They have sprung up on every hand. I am helpless and unprotected ever since Essex left for France."

With Essex away she was miserable and bad-tempered, restless and ill at ease. The reason for his going had much to do with it, too, for reluctantly she had agreed to send a small army to France with Essex in command. The domestic situation in that country had grown worse since the death of the queen mother and the assassination of her one remaining son, Henry III. The new king was the Huguenot, Henry of Navarre, now Henry IV of France, but with a Catholic League as well as the Spanish ranged against him, he was being forced to fight for the throne. Lately, all but vanquished, he had appealed to Elizabeth for help. She had refused and continued to refuse until it had become evident that if Spain gained a foothold in France, a Spanish invasion of England might be more than possible.

"Delay will only make extraction all the more painful," Hatton insisted.

"Not only uncompromising, but relentless too!" Elizabeth wailed.

Avoiding her eyes, Hatton was staring down at her hands. Afraid to look at her, of course! She examined her hands herself. They were as slim as ever, but the skin, dear heaven, was dry and wrinkled. They were the hands of a very old woman! Damn him to hell, the unspoken thought was his, not hers!

She reflected that she had not been too pleased with Hatton, even before he had put the dread word "dentist" into her mind. Only yesterday he had presumed, though afterward swearing that it was a mere slip of the pen, to change a word here and there in the poem she had been dictating. He was no longer, it seemed, the uncritical friend, the twin virgin soul, loving and worshiping her for the sake of her literary skill, her undoubted mental brilliance.

He had even dared to support William Cecil in the matter of Walsingham's successor. The choice of young Robert Cecil had been a wise one but that was not the point. Hatton was like all the rest of them, ridiculously jealous of Essex. For that reason, obviously, he had urged her to let her favorite go to France. Hatton hoped—of course he did!—that the gallant Essex would be killed in battle.

"Lord Burghley would agree that the tooth must come out," Hatton went on stubbornly. "I shall write to him at once."

"This is scarcely a national emergency," she said dryly.

"Madam, anything that concerns the queen is a national emergency."

Elizabeth liked the pointed flattery but, refusing to be mollified, told Hatton that if he had nothing more sensible to say he had better make himself scarce. This he did, but with a firm step and a glint of determination in his eyes.

That he wrote to Cecil, who was resting in the country, was clear enough, for a few days later young Robert remarked that his father had written that the removal of a rotten tooth was as necessary to an individual as the removal of Spanish forces from French soil was to a whole nation.

"A disgusting simile," Elizabeth barked.

She looked at William Cecil's son now in sour distaste. He

was short in stature and round-shouldered enough to be called a hunchback. He had a broad intelligent forehead, small penetrating eyes, a long nose, and a long pointed beard which seemed at times to be an extension of the nose. He had a liking for black clothing and thick white ruffs. The one he wore now reached down from his hair, which was trimmed neatly about his ears, to his shoulders. It suggested that he had no neck at all and gave him a most stunted look. She sighed resignedly. Robert Cecil was clever, not at all the man his father was, but the next best in the country, and with that, she would have to content herself.

Hatton's next move was to appear at court with a dentist, a ghastly ruffian of a man, a figure one might expect to meet in a nightmare. Indeed, the brief *sight* of him brought on a whole series of nightmares from which she woke panting and racked with toothache such as she had never before experienced. The whole court suffered in consequence and state affairs came to a standstill.

Hatton then called Essex to his aid, for her favorite wrote saying that as far as he could gather, there would be no peace at court until a certain royal tooth was removed from a certain royal head. He begged her to be brave and summon the dentist. In a rage she sent for Hatton, attacked him with all the many oaths at her disposal and drew from him the admission that he had not expected Essex to make capital out of his own unwitting frankness.

"More fool you!" she jeered. "Is Essex your dearest friend?"

She sent Hatton away and fell into a better mood, partly because the tooth was giving her a little peace, partly because Essex had so neatly turned the tables on Hatton. Nevertheless, he ought to have known better than to write about dentists.

Following this came alarming news from France.

"The Earl of Essex," Robert Cecil informed her, in his precise, emotionless voice, "has a fondness for taking unnecessary risks. Apart from embarking on hawking expeditions in territory thick with enemy soldiers, he recently made a hazardous visit to King Henry's headquarters to discuss the siege of Rouen."

"Hazardous?"

"He went attended by only the smallest of forces, was all but cut off from the main body, and escaped capture by no more than a hair's breadth."

Alarm for the earl's safety instantly filled Elizabeth's heart, but she refused to admit as much. "A gallant, dashing young fellow," she said perversely.

"This is war, madam, not army maneuvers in peaceful England. The commander of Your Majesty's forces in France should know better than to trail a pike like a common soldier."

The phrase amused her; if repeated to Essex, it would infuriate him.

"Write and tell him that," she said.

"An my own account, madam?"

"I'll countersign the letter myself."

Essex replied that if he were at court and actually had a pike to trail he would use it for the purpose of forcing the royal tooth from the royal mouth. He challenged her to face the dentist as gallantly as he proposed to face the enemy. Stung by this, Elizabeth ordered Hatton to bring his wretched dentist to court again. He did so immediately. Whereupon, with a dozen physicians standing by, she opened her mouth and clenched her hands. But the sight of the dentist's evil face made her change her mind. She closed her mouth firmly, opening it again only to say that the tooth, which had ceased to trouble her, was as sound as the day it had cut through her gum.

"Madam," Hatton said persuasively, "I have a present for you which I procured abroad at vast expense."

"Very well, let me have it," she snapped.

"*Afterward*, Your Majesty."

"Fool! Am I a small girl to be bribed with sweetmeats?"

"These are sweeter to look upon than any sweetmeats."

Instantly she was consumed with curiosity. "What manner of present is it?"

"Your wearing of them will set a new fashion."

"Procured at vast expense, you say?"

"At vast expense."

"Some new form of jewelry?"

"There are jewels in their composition."

Elizabeth opened her mouth, closed her eyes, and with an

agonized gesture summoned the dentist to step forward. The cold grip of the pincers sent a horrible shudder through her whole body. She waited for the crunching sound. None came.

"There!" Hatton cried. "The tooth was surprisingly loose. I vow Your Majesty felt not a thing."

She looked in amazement at the tooth which the dentist now held between thumb and finger. Experimentally she touched the hole in her gum with the tip of her tongue. She spat three times before there was much sign of blood.

"Now the present," she demanded.

It turned out to be a pair of gloves of fine black silk decorated with an intricate pattern of tiny diamonds, seed pearls, and much gold thread. Gloves had fallen out of favor in England, except for riding. They were sometimes carried, certainly, but these were obviously meant to be worn. That was what Hatton had meant by his reference to a new fashion. Elizabeth put them on eagerly, arched her fingers, stretched them out, and arched them again. The gloves were a perfect fit.

"Of the finest Venetian workmanship," Hatton assured her.

Only then did she remember the way he had stared at her hands, his eyes saying plainly: Those of a very old woman. By heaven, what a calculated insult! This present had been made for one purpose only—to hide the withered skin, the unlovely wrinkles. She told him as much and cursed him again and again.

Hatton's aging face puckered up; he looked as if he were about to burst into tears. And that infuriated her all the more.

"I should have guessed your intention the moment I caught you staring at my hands," she raged. "I have never been so insulted in my life, never!"

"Dear madam," Hatton protested miserably, "I was only trying to estimate the exact length of your fingers before sending to Venice for the gloves."

"A fine excuse! I'm doubly displeased with you, Hatton. But for your cajolery that perfectly good tooth would still be in my mouth. For God's sake, go! Enter my presence chamber again and I'll have you removed under guard!"

Nevertheless, she wore the gloves for the rest of the day and put them on again the next day after the morning toilet. They were already causing a great stir at court and much admiration.

Her ladies begged permission to wear gloves also, indoors and out, and within a week the fashion had become so widespread that Elizabeth decided to impose a special import duty. She admitted that her hands looked most becoming in gloves, and for that reason she must continue to wear them. In the course of time she might even recall Hatton and forgive him.

Additional news from France drove this thought from her mind. The siege of Rouen had continued, and Essex had led his army into battle at last. He himself had fought with every sign of gallantry, but the combined English and French forces had received a serious check by the advance from the Netherlands of a Spanish army. After that, King Henry had been obliged to raise the siege.

"How many men have we lost?" Elizabeth asked Robert Cecil.

"The army has been reduced by half, madam, chiefly through sickness."

"To say nothing of Essex's incompetence!" she cried.

Her annoyance deepened when Essex sent a demand—it was clearly a demand, not a request—for more men and money. This was followed by a French plenipotentiary who arrived hastily from the French headquarters. Fortunately for him he made a humble request, but then he added that the Earl of Essex had assured King Henry the Queen of England would gladly comply.

"Is Essex the King, and I his obedient subject?" she cried. "By God, the conviction that he rules this realm has been growing on him for some time past. Essex shall be recalled!"

Through the privy council she ordered him home at once, and Essex ignored her command. Then she heard that he had been wounded and, growing alarmed, ordered him once more to return to England. Again he refused to obey.

Meanwhile the story was circulated that he had been wounded while fighting a duel with the governor of Rouen. She wrote him a sharp letter telling him that he had shown a regrettable sense of decorum in fighting a duel with a man who was no better than a rebel. Finally she learned that no duel had actually taken place; nor for that matter had Essex been wounded, even in battle.

At this time, while her anger with Essex grew apace, Robert

Cecil informed her that Hatton had fallen ill and was not expected to live. She went at once to Chris's house in the Strand, taking with her her chief physician. Hatton indeed looked close to death. His face was pale, his lips parched; he was so weak that when he struggled to sit up in bed at the sight of her, he fell back helpless on the pillows.

"My God, Hatton, is this a ruse to gain my forgiveness?" she cried.

"A ruse, madam?" he gasped.

"You were always a consummate actor, damn you!"

The physician examined Hatton and told Elizabeth privately: "One would think that Sir Christopher had suffered a disastrous love affair and was dying of a broken heart. However, that cannot be, for he is a confirmed bachelor."

"You damned idiot!" she shrieked.

She remained at the patient's side for the rest of the day, bathing his brow and trying, unsuccessfully, to tempt him to sip a little broth.

"Tell me the truth," she said once. "Was my unkindness the cause of this illness?"

Hatton shook his head slowly. "I was harassed by my debt to the crown, madam. Since I had been cast into disfavor, I feared Your Majesty might demand immediate repayment."

Elizabeth remembered then that in a moment of weakness she had lent him money. "Fool!" she said, in a choking voice. "You know what an old usurer I am. You have ample security in property. Could I not seize your estate?"

Hatton laughed weakly and begged her forgiveness. Then he pleaded with her to say that she knew in her heart when he presented the gloves he had meant no insult whatever.

Elizabeth kissed him on the brow. "Dear Chris Hatton, I knew that from the first. I didn't rant at *you*, only at my other self. For God's sake get well. I need you at court, if only to dance a galliard or two."

But he died two days later, and though Elizabeth remained dry-eyed, she felt utterly desolate. And all because of a tooth, she thought angrily. At court it had often been said that Christopher Hatton had danced his way into royal favor, but in point of fact . . . a tooth had brought him into her life and another

tooth had taken him out of it. How death was on the prowl! Robin Dudley, Walsingham, and now Chris Hatton. Cecil would surely be the next, or perhaps even Essex, through his stupidity in the field. She issued yet another and sterner royal command for his return and, hoping that he would be too afraid to disobey this time, began to feel a little happier.

Chapter 52

The Twelfth Night celebrations were in full swing at Whitehall. A throne had been placed in the middle of a dais and Elizabeth sat there, her sharp eyes darting pleasurably about the crowded hall. A short play had just been presented, the players had departed, and now the courtiers and the privileged guests from the City were dancing merrily.

Elizabeth glanced at Essex, who stood at her side, a hand resting lightly on the arm of her throne. He caught her eye and they smiled fondly at each other. There had, of course, been many sharp quarrels since his return from France two years ago, but tonight she liked everything about him. She was satisfied that she had tamed him a little and would have no further difficulty in controlling him, however arrogant and defiant he might become from time to time. Recently she had made him a privy councilor, and he was taking very seriously his attempt to form what he grandly called the Essex Party. However, he was not making much progress, for the Cecil influence was still too strong, and Elizabeth, in spite of her infatuation, was still wise enough to listen only to the Cecils, father and son, when important decisions must be made.

And so, where the problem of the war was not too prominent in her mind, time passed happily enough. Time in fact was flying all too quickly. Not that this mattered very much, she thought, providing one moved with it only in experience, not in years. Without question she carried her sixty years far more lightly than Essex carried his twenty-six, for only yesterday

he had grumbled that he was growing old while his ambition remained unrealized.

"Tell me the nature of your ambition," she had challenged.

"To be the greatest man of my age," he had replied fretfully. "Greater in statesmanship than your lord treasurer, greater in war than my late stepfather, greater in high adventure at sea than Drake, greater in cunning than Walsingham ever was!"

A stirring declaration, one which Elizabeth savored still, savored maternally, yet regarded as bombastic arrogance when her native cunning and her knowledge of men held full sway, and yet again regarded with a fluttering heart when the mistress-lover association blinded her to all else.

"Your Majesty has not yet danced," Essex remarked.

"Nor do I wish to."

"So I must remain idle at your side," he laughed, "knowing that I dare not dance with any other woman."

"A touching and quite unaccustomed obedience," she allowed.

Essex sighed elaborately. "I realize, naturally, that standing here like a statue, I make a most entrancing ornament, a foil as it were to your own unparalleled beauty."

Delighted with this flattery, Elizabeth stroked his cheek, thus making, in the presence of the court, a ridiculous spectacle of herself, but what did *that* matter? It was her own very special privilege, a royal prerogative if ever there was one.

"Are you too tired to dance?" he teased.

She rose instantly. "Tell the musicians to play a galliard. I vow I'll dance the gallant Essex to a standstill!"

She danced three galliards with him in rapid succession, ignored the pain which gripped the small of her back and danced three more. Then, to her secret relief, Essex admitted that he had indeed been danced to a standstill.

"Too much of this sort of thing," he complained, "and I'll be no use at all to the King of France."

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"A cunning creature, this queen of mine," Essex laughed. "She knows how I long to take up arms again but is set on preventing it by one violent galliard after another."

"What chance have you of becoming the greatest man of the age if I let you get yourself killed in France?" she grumbled.

"Madam, my honor is at stake."

With a sinking heart Elizabeth recognized in his voice and eyes the old defiant willfulness.

"The King of France is harder pressed than ever," he went on. "Let me lead another army and drive the Spanish out of France forever."

"The last expedition cost me thirty thousand pounds. Enough money has been wasted already in France."

Essex grinned appealingly. "I see I shall make no headway with you now, dear skinflint."

But he returned to the attack the next day and the next. She refused to listen. At the end of the week he asked her to lend him the money for the raising of a private army, the debt to be canceled only if he succeeded in the mission.

"You would squander the money on other things," she said acidly. "I know you of old! A private army of any size would never be raised."

"Then I'll go to France without permission!"

"And also without an army? Much use that would be."

"The King of France would gladly find a command for me."

"Go to France without permission and I'll never receive you at court again."

"Are you issuing a challenge, madam?"

"I'm stating a fact, no more, no less."

After that, Essex absented himself from court for three days but made no attempt to leave England. When he presented himself again, Elizabeth pretended not to have missed him.

Not long after this, alarming news arrived from France. A Spanish army had advanced from the Netherlands and was attacking Calais. Elizabeth was in residence at Greenwich Palace when word of this reached her. Essex immediately urged that an army be sent to Calais before the town fell and with a significant gesture drew her attention to a distant rumbling sound.

"The Spanish guns," he said grimly.

"Nonsense! A thunderstorm in the Channel, no more."

The "thunderstorm" continued throughout the stillness of the April day. Elizabeth was badly shaken and knew that some-

thing must be done. The next morning, after the distant gunfire had been heard again, she issued an order for the levying of troops and placed Essex in command.

"Assemble your army at Dover," she said. "Stand by there to repel any attempt at invasion."

"My destination is surely Calais, not Dover!" Essex protested.

But this she would not have, for England was strong and invincible only so long as she refrained from sending troops to a foreign field. Essex rushed down to Dover in a temper. She half expected him to disobey her, but before he could make any move to do so, Calais fell—not only the town, which had been badly pressed, but the citadel itself. Elizabeth was more alarmed than she cared to admit, but by the time Essex had come storming up from Dover to demand an instant attack on Calais, a more daring idea had occurred to her.

"To strike at Spain through Calais would be a waste of time, men and money," she told him. "King Philip is assembling another armada at Cadiz. Can you suggest anything better than an attack on Cadiz, the burning of the Spanish galleons and the taking of much treasure?"

Essex was all smiles now. "If there were Spanish treasure worth the taking at Calais, Your Majesty would have ordered an attack on Calais long ago."

"By God I would!"

"I am of course to be placed at the head of the Cadiz expedition," Essex said confidently.

She shook her head. "I need you at court."

He flew into a temper at once. "How you try to humiliate me! Do you want me to go into exile and never return?"

"Exile is pleasant enough if one has money. You, in exile, would be penniless."

"You think of nothing but money. Money is your god."

"I think of nothing but England," she said warmly. "England is my god. If I hoard money like a careful housewife, I do it for her sake. England was bankrupt when I came to the throne; England today was never more prosperous."

They argued for weeks whether he should go to Cadiz and finally, when he had grown pale and thin Elizabeth gave in, appalled that frustration should reduce him to such a sorry state.

"Howard shall command the naval force; you, the land force," she told him wearily.

"I had set my heart on complete control," Essex complained. "It's either that or nothing, by God!"

"Then by God it's nothing!"

"Is it a joint command, or am I to be subservient to Howard?"

"A joint command."

Essex bowed stiffly. "As Your Majesty wishes."

He rushed off to Plymouth to confer with Howard, and then wrote her a sweetly worded letter expressing his humble thanks. She glowed with pleasure. The arguments and the quarrels of the past were forgotten. Essex was so much in favor again that she merely smiled indulgently when told that he was bickering constantly with Howard. The dear, silly boy was certainly standing on his dignity, claiming that the army was far more important than the navy, that an earl should have more authority than a mere lord admiral. In a private letter he told her gleefully that when it came to signing official documents he generally managed to place his signature above Howard's, just as he generally managed, at mealtimes, to seize the chair at the head of the table. She replied sharply that this was nonsense—that all he was required to seize was Spanish treasure.

"That is the private side of your mission," she concluded. "You are charged to return and lay at my feet your personal share of all the plunder."

The expedition sailed at last, leaving Elizabeth in an agony of anxiety. She was sure one moment that Essex would be killed in action, just as sure the next that he would fall in love with some Spanish beauty and remain away forever. When not busy with state affairs she tried to occupy herself with literary pursuits. She wrote a prayer for the success of the expedition and a poem in honor of Essex. The prayer was to be read in all the churches, but the poem had the doleful ring of an epitaph, so she destroyed it in horror.

Meanwhile affairs in France were improving, partly because King Henry, to consolidate his position, had become a Catholic. Elizabeth wrote him a stern, disapproving letter, but instead of replying, as he might have been expected to do, that she had

once changed *her* religion, he merely remarked that Paris was well worth a Mass or two. And that, in the end, made her roar with laughter.

Essex came home unscathed and posted up from Plymouth in such high spirits that he broke the two-hundred-mile journey only when a change of horse was absolutely necessary. Reaching Whitehall late at night, he burst into Elizabeth's inner chamber and flung himself exhausted at her feet. Immeasurably happy, she nonetheless greeted him with a scornful laugh.

"What manner of treasure is this? I see only the body of a mere man."

"The treasure follows on pack mules," he assured her.

She raised him to his feet and kissed him warmly.

"A second Drake, by God!"

She sent for food and wine and sat at table with Essex while he ate ravenously and bit by bit pieced together the whole story. The English fleet had appeared unheralded in the harbor at Cadiz and within fourteen hours had burned the Spanish shipping and taken possession of the town.

"What of the Spanish merchant fleet from the West Indies?" Elizabeth asked eagerly. "My spies reported a concentration of as many as fifty ships in Cadiz harbor, ships carrying treasure worth all of eight million crowns."

Essex avoided her eyes. "A vast fortune, that."

"Come, answer my question!" she said sharply.

"The Spanish got the better of us in that respect, though they did themselves no good thereby. We had the merchantmen trapped farther up the harbor and the Spanish admiral knew it. Rather than let them fall into our hands he destroyed them. The burning hulks sank with what was left of the treasure."

Elizabeth looked at Essex in disgust. "A second Drake, did I say!"

"But think of the loss to King Philip! The poor fellow will fall deeper into debt than ever."

Elizabeth scowled heavily. It was scarcely a consoling thought. Philip would have lost the treasure in any case. However, she remembered Essex' reference to pack mules and smiled hopefully.

"At least you brought *some* treasure. Tell me the value of it."

Essex sprang eagerly from the table. "The treasure I was fortunate enough to secure is priceless, utterly priceless!"

"So is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Pray come to the point!"

"During a raid on Faro I took possession of Bishop Osorius' complete library. Never have I seen such a wonderful collection of books, never!"

Elizabeth was speechless for a moment, then words came tumbling from her mouth. "You great idiot! You let eight million crowns slip through your fingers and you bring me—books!"

Imitating her scornful tone exactly, and running the words together, Essex caught up and repeated her last phrase.

"Andyoubringme—books!"

Elizabeth flew at him and boxed his ears.

"I am no more unmindful of the value of learning than I am of the fact that Cadiz has cost me fifty thousand pounds," she panted. "What rankles is your attempt to disguise your incompetence by flinging a handful of books in my face. Keep them for yourself. Retire to the country with them. Read the lot—it will take you years, no doubt—and have the good sense not to show yourself at court again till the last page of the last book has been turned."

By morning her anger had cooled, and when Howard arrived and spoke highly of Essex' bravery during the expedition, she began to feel a growing remorse. She sent for him. He refused to come, and so, with remorse still heavy upon her, she sought him out at Essex House in the Strand. There she found him pacing up and down in the oak-paneled gallery. He held a writing tablet in one hand, a pen in the other. His face, exceedingly pale, bore a tortured expression.

"Are you writing out your will?" she asked amiably. "If so, you may as well leave me the Osorius Library."

Essex gave her a harassed look. "I was struggling to write a poem before obeying Your Majesty's command to retire to the country."

Elizabeth smiled approvingly. "How much alike we are. When a crisis is upon us, we struggle to write poems. Let me see it, please."

She took the tablet from his hand. Most of what he had written had been scratched out. Two lines only were discernible.

*In some unhaunted desert where, obscure
From all society, from love and hate—*

"I think there should be a comma after 'desert,'" she said and added emotionally: "Why flee from my hate when it would also mean fleeing from my love? Never would I want to flee from *your* hate, even if hate had driven out love completely."

Essex fell to his knees. She allowed him to kiss her hands and, freeing them, presently stroked his hair.

"I must think of a fitting way to reward you for your services at Cadiz," she said.

"Precedence over Howard in the future is all I ask!" Essex cried.

It was a childish request. He deserved a sound spanking. However, she cast this thought from her mind—there was peace between them again, a peace that might endure for a week or two!—and smiled on him fondly.

"If ever I find it necessary to send you against the Spanish again," she promised, "you shall have sole and undisputed command. However, I really think you should place a comma after 'desert.' Shall we work together on your poem?"

Chapter 53

Old William Cecil came tottering into the room, leaning on a stout cane. He was followed by his son Robert and Lord Admiral Howard, now Earl of Nottingham. Essex was already present, standing languidly by Elizabeth's chair, but for the moment Elizabeth had eyes only for the ailing William Cecil. He was seventy-seven, an incredible old man, his mind as alert as ever in spite of his dying body.

"Dear Will Cecil," she cried impulsively, "it was not my wish

that you should drag yourself to court. I could have conferred with you at home."

"My presence here was needed," Cecil sighed. "There are those at court—" his eyes strayed for a moment to Essex—"who would advise Your Majesty rashly in this grievous matter of Ireland."

Elizabeth nodded her agreement, but she was thinking: If Cecil is seventy-seven, then I am sixty-four. Well, there was no gainsaying it, arithmetic being what it was, but not even at seventy-seven, or for that matter ninety-seven, would she look as feeble as Cecil. She would be exactly as she was now, an elderly, healthy, and quite lively woman, able to sit in the saddle all day and dance the galliard all night.

"Spain is no longer a menace, except in respect of Ireland," Robert Cecil ventured. "Therefore the sooner we appoint a lord Deputy capable of quelling the Irish rebels, the better it will be for England."

Elizabeth agreed, but vexing as the subject of Ireland was, she dwelt with pleasure on the continued failure of Spain to build up an armada strong enough for a real attack on England. Soon after the Cadiz expedition Philip had retaliated by sending a small fleet and an army to Ireland, but a storm at sea had scattered it, and Spanish losses had been heavy. God, without doubt, was as gallant an English gentleman as if He had been born in London itself. Philip, supremely unaware of this, had started to build up yet another armada, a vast fleet which in the course of time had suffered the same fate.

"The appointment of a suitable lord deputy is a small matter," Essex said confidently. "The queen and I have already decided in favor of my own nominee, Sir George Carew."

Elizabeth laughed dryly. "The earl marshal, as ever, has a habit of assuming that, having made up his mind, he has automatically made up *mine* also."

Earl marshal, she thought—how grand the title sounded, and how grand Essex believed it to be. It was an old office, if office it could be called, which had been revived in order to pacify him and give him precedence over Howard, whose elevation he had resented. In such an office his main duty was to defend the queen from personal injury, to prevent brawls in or near

the court, and to arrest and cast into prison any person who presumed to approach the royal apartments without authority.

"The earl marshal," Elizabeth went on, "is well aware that I myself prefer Sir William Knollys."

"And why, by God?" Essex demanded heatedly. "The answer is obvious. The Cecils, father and son, want Knollys!"

Having looked forward to a diverting little scene, but never words as heated as these, Elizabeth was appalled at the deliberate rudeness. She would never learn, it seemed, that Essex, where the Cecils were concerned, was likely to fly into a tantrum at a moment's notice.

"Naturally the Cecils want Knollys," she said icily. "They want him because I myself want him. And so should you, if you were not blinded by jealousy. Is he not a close relative of mine, as well as an uncle of yours? Your pettiness is beyond my understanding."

Essex flushed deeply. Many as their quarrels had been, Elizabeth had seldom before spoken so sharply to him, in public.

"Carew, being *my* choice, is therefore the better choice," he said and turned his back on her.

Elizabeth, too, flushed deeply. Essex had turned his back on her many times before, but never in public.

"Essex!" she rasped.

He faced her again, his shoulders squared, his chin thrust out, the mocking light in his eyes a challenge in itself. There was nothing for it but to slap his face, which she had never done before in public, except gently and playfully, a gesture of affection. The ringing blow brought an instant silence to the room. Essex, pale now, seized the hilt of his sword and began with a slow deliberate movement to draw the weapon. A little gasp broke the silence. Howard sprang forward and placed himself between Essex and Elizabeth. Essex uttered a strangled sound and fell back.

"By God," he said tensely, "never would I suffer such an impertinence from anyone, still less from a king in petticoats!"

And then, without a backward glance, he rushed headlong from the room.

Thoroughly humiliated, Elizabeth remembered how he had once boasted that a Devereux was as good as a Tudor any day.

Apparently he now believed that a Devereux was better than a Tudor. She forced a bright smile. Something had to be done, and quickly, to swing the situation in her favor.

"To be called a king in petticoats, gentlemen, is a compliment that I'll relish till the end of my days," she laughed. "And so, I think, will Sir William Knollys."

"Your Majesty makes a wise choice in Sir William," Robert Cecil assured her gravely.

Yet she knew she had deceived nobody, not even herself. The two Cecils and Howard, deeply embarrassed still, were clearly wondering what action she would take against Essex. She did not know herself, and during the rest of the day she nursed the deep hurt he had done her with anger, indignation, and fretfulness, and finally with an overwhelming misery, which was even harder to bear. She cursed herself and Essex, yet she knew, bound as she was by the devilish infatuation, that she could take no action against him. She also knew that she could never forgive him.

He had gone, she learned, to Wanstead Park, a small Devereux property on the outskirts of London, and from there a week later he wrote her a reproachful letter. She had hoped for and half expected him to beg her forgiveness, but no, she had done him a great injury. The blow on the cheek, struck by a woman of advanced years, had meant nothing physically, he asserted, but spiritually it had entered his very soul. He would never forgive her.

A woman of advanced years! That, by God, was adding insult to injury. "Let him rot at Wanstead!" she raged. "I'll never think of him again."

She tried her best to keep to this resolution and was helped a little by her concern for William Cecil, whose health failed so rapidly in the following weeks that every day was expected to be his last. She sat often at his bedside, feeding him scraps of chicken and guiding a cup of broth to his mouth. It seemed to her that a part of herself, a part that was the England they both loved, was being torn from her. They talked but little, though up to the very end his mind was marvelously alert.

"Old friend," she asked once, "do you remember the day you came out to Hatfield with the news of my sister's death?"

"Distinctly, madam."

"And the simple words you uttered, words that moved me so deeply?"

Cecil stirred himself. "I said that Your Majesty had saved us all. You asked why. I replied, 'By remaining alive.'"

"Would to God that *you* could remain alive and so save *me* in the last years of my reign."

Cecil chuckled faintly. "I have never known Your Majesty to be greatly at a loss."

"Perhaps not, in affairs of state, but when it comes to affairs of the heart . . ."

"Essex . . ." Cecil said, lingering on the name.

Elizabeth took his hand in hers. "Tell me truly, am I the besotted fool so many people must think me?"

Cecil's old eyes glowed with affection. "By the morning, madam, you will surely regret such hasty words."

"By God I will!" she laughed.

"When one has an only son," he murmured, "one is apt to spoil him."

"Your perception is greater than I would ever have dreamed," she said dryly.

"And when the would-be son would play the would-be lover . . ."

"Enough, old friend," Elizabeth said, but gently. "Close the sorry subject by telling me what I ought to do."

"And have you send me to die in the Tower?"

"To fail me in the end, that is scarcely noble of you," she said in mock reproach.

"That you should never fail yourself is my only prayer, madam."

"That, then, is what I must do—if I have the strength, Cecil, if I have the strength."

After a few moments, when she thought he had fallen asleep, Cecil referred to the many marriage negotiations of the past.

"The strain must have been greater than even I suspected, madam. If you had not been forced to sacrifice yourself for England, you might have found real happiness married to a man of your choice."

"Never!" she said harshly. "I hated the thought of marriage, hated it for a reason that I'd confide in no one."

She regretted her words immediately, fearing that she had betrayed herself, but to her relief Cecil's head had fallen back on the pillow, his eyes were closed, and he seemed not to have heard.

Cecil died on August fourth, in the year 1598, two months after Elizabeth's break with Essex, and his passing brought the problem of that young man fully to the surface of her mind. She had heard no more from him. He was still sulking at Wanstead but emerged from that retreat to attend Cecil's funeral. She steeled herself to ignore him, to glance at him merely as if he were a complete stranger. He lifted his bowed head once during the funeral service and was seen to be in tears.

This served only to arouse Elizabeth's contempt. Having opposed the Cecil influence time and again, why should he weep now? The tears, which made a pitiful woman of him, were solely for her benefit and whether they indicated repentance or anger still, they moved her not at all.

Or so she told herself.

Further brooding on the Essex problem was minimized by the arrival of black news from Ireland. An English army had been attacked and all but wiped out by an Irish force under the rebel leader, the Earl of Tyrone. Elizabeth had often regretted that she should have inherited Ireland and its troubles and had tried not to think too much about that country, but this was different. During the years of her reign, Ireland had cost the crown a matter of £300,000, and now—*this!* The disgraceful defeat had placed the north of Ireland almost entirely in Tyrone's hands.

Although she had tacitly agreed to appoint Sir William Knollys Lord Deputy of Ireland, she had not yet made the appointment official. Because of Essex she had tried to forget the whole unhappy subject, but now, having delayed too long already, she saw that she must take definite action. The council held an urgent conference, and Elizabeth in turn conferred just as urgently with Robert Cecil, who said ruefully that neither Knollys nor Carew was overanxious to become lord deputy of Ireland.

"And why not?" she demanded.

"Too many reputations, military and political alike, have been ruined in Ireland, madam."

Instantly came the thought: Then why not send the incompetent Essex there? It was followed quickly by a stab of self-reproach. She had no real wish to add further ruin to the ruin he had already brought upon himself. On the other hand Essex, for all she knew, might acquit himself as honorably in Ireland as he had done at Cadiz. If she gave him the appointment and he gained the required victory in Ireland, might not all be forgiven? But how to get him back to court? He was as pigheaded as ever, and by heaven, she wasn't going to ask his forgiveness! Even if she did decide to make him lord deputy of Ireland he would have to apologize first.

To Elizabeth's surprise, Essex, so far as the Irish question alone was concerned, made the first move. He wrote a curt letter in which he commented on the mismanagement leading to the disaster, and offered his services.

"Essex is actually asking me to send him to Ireland," she told Robert Cecil. "Naturally, I would prefer to send him to hell, and I would, if I were on speaking terms with the devil."

Robert Cecil pursed his thin lips. "The Earl of Essex, for all we know, may be the right man, madam."

"I see your drift!" she cried. "You fear I might bring him back to court and keep him here, where he would oppose you with renewed vigor. But if I send him to Ireland he may never come back, or if he does, in abject disgrace."

Robert Cecil protested that nothing was further from his mind, suggested several other men, and drew up a list of names.

"Add Essex' name," Elizabeth instructed him, "and place it at the bottom. Let one of his friends see the list, as if by accident. Then drop the information, also by accident, that I have half a mind to place Essex at the *top* of the list."

She waited impatiently for results and learned presently that Essex was deeply moved by her apparent softening.

"Then let him apologize!" she rasped.

A week passed, two weeks, three. There was no apology. Finally, almost five months after the break had taken place, Essex appeared suddenly at Greenwich Palace when Elizabeth

was spending a few days there. It was Sunday morning, and she was on the point of going to prayers. He slipped into the tapestried presence chamber just as she entered it from her inner chamber. Her face stiffened at the sight of him. He bowed briefly but she took no notice. Then he placed himself between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, who were waiting to attend her to the royal chapel. Each cleric, revealing a horror that almost made Elizabeth laugh, drew close together and hid him from her view. A sigh that might well have been a laugh of scorn ran round the crowded chamber.

Elizabeth moved slowly forward. With satisfaction she realized that Essex had never seen her looking more magnificent. She wore a gown of pure white silk threaded richly with large seed pearls, and over it a black and silver mantle. A tiny gold crown sat jauntily on a new wig, more yellow in color than red; Hatton's gloves were on her hands, and fitting closely over the fingers was an inordinate number of diamond and sapphire rings, while about her neck she wore a diamond-studded collar. On reaching the two clerics, she paused for a moment and peered between them.

"Ah, we have a stranger in our midst!"

Half an hour later she returned from the chapel preceded by the lord chancellor, who carried the royal seals in a red silk purse, and two knights of the garter, one bearing the scepter, the other the sword of state. Essex was still in the presence chamber, an uncertain look on his pale face. She passed so close to him that she could see the little beads of perspiration on his brow.

"The scepter, you see, is still mine," she hissed, "also the sword of state."

"Providing the sword of state is not used as a weapon against me," he hissed back, "you may keep your damnable scepter."

At the sound of his voice Elizabeth's heart missed a beat; the spirit of his remark, insolent as it was, brought a lump to her throat. His great dark eyes, burning now in so pale a face, were a torment to look upon. If she was hurting him, she was certainly hurting herself a great deal more.

"Are you tempting me to break your skull with the scepter

rather than pierce your miserable heart with the sword?" she barked.

"No sword can injure a heart that is already dead," Essex said passionately.

"If you wish to remain at court you know what is expected of you," she reminded him.

He averted his eyes, stepped back a pace and stared in silence beyond her shoulder. She shrugged and continued her slow progress through the presence chamber. Later she passed through it again on her way to the dining hall. Essex was still there. She ignored him then, and ignored him again, her heart beating painfully in her breast, when she returned from dinner. Late in the afternoon, after an unhappy struggle with herself, she sent a page to summon him to her presence. The boy came back and said that the earl marshal was no longer at the palace.

Elizabeth returned to Whitehall the next day. There, to her delight and indignation, she found Essex lounging in an antechamber. She swept past him hurriedly, spent the early evening attending to state affairs, and learned from Robert Cecil that Essex had resumed his duties as master of the horse.

"Your Majesty has not yet dismissed him from that position, of course."

"Nor have I deprived him of the office of earl marshal."

"Nor yet appointed him lord deputy of Ireland," Robert Cecil tempted unsmilingly.

Late that same evening Essex, his patience exhausted, burst into Elizabeth's inner chamber. He pointed a finger at her and laughed wildly.

"Do you still cheat at cards, madam?" he demanded. "I seem to remember that I issued a challenge years ago, a challenge that was never fully taken up."

"And I seem to remember that that same night you declared that a Devereux was as good as a Tudor any day."

"Any day!" he cried.

"Go to the devil," she said.

"By that, madam, you surely mean, go to Ireland."

"I see nothing to prevent you from enlisting in one of the regiments."

Essex fell to his knees. "You want an apology. Well, so do

I! Make me lord deputy of Ireland and I'll accept it as precisely that, an apology."

"By God, Essex—I!"

"Wait, madam! As for my own apology, surely my conquest of the Irish rebels will be apology enough!"

It was a neat compromise.

"Rise to your feet, lord deputy of Ireland," Elizabeth said. "You may kiss my hand."

Chapter 54

"We have word from Harrington at last," Robert Cecil said, "a full report covering the two months the Earl of Essex has been in Ireland."

"Is Harrington to be trusted?" Elizabeth asked stiffly.

Robert Cecil nodded briefly. "Of all the earl's friends, he is best aware that England is ruled by the queen, not by Essex."

John Harrington, a member of the so-called Essex Party, had gone to Ireland in command of a cavalry regiment, but in addition at Robert Cecil's suggestion, he had been ordered to watch Essex carefully and make reports on his conduct.

"Let me have the report," Elizabeth said.

Robert Cecil placed several sheets of paper on her desk. "I have already perused it with the utmost care, madam. The Earl of Essex has not yet committed any definite act of treason."

"How clearly you would relish such an act!"

Indignant as Elizabeth felt, the thought that Essex was not entirely trustworthy was never far from her mind. On the surface her relations with him from the moment of the reconciliation, if reconciliation it could be called, to the moment of his departure had been amiable enough, yet her heart had often felt dead within her. She had begun to recognize weakness in everything Essex said and did, weakness in his vaunting ambition, his touchy pride, his black jealousy when she looked with favor on anyone else.

Harrington's report opened with a reference to Spain. Earlier Essex had informed her that Spanish aid to the Irish rebels was not as great as had been first suspected. Harrington himself insisted that, in spite of King Philip's death, it was even greater.

As a matter of fact, Harrington suspected that Essex was playing with the idea of reaching a private agreement with Spain. A private agreement indeed! Nevertheless, she tried to tell herself that a settlement between Essex and Spain would not necessarily be an act of treason, only an act of disobedience.

For the rest, the report told her little that she did not already know, yet it shed a new light on Essex' conduct. He had been ordered to lead his army against the Earl of Tyrone, but instead of marching north to Tyrone's stronghold, he had wasted nearly two months in the counties south of Dublin. Not an act of treason, but certainly an act of disobedience! In a letter he had sought to excuse himself by saying that first he must "clean up" the many little bands of rebels south of Dublin. The Harrington report gave a clearer account of how he had done this. There had been practically no resistance from the scattered rebels, but the English settlers had welcomed Essex on every hand, greeted him with flowery speeches, feasted him like a king. A victorious campaign? It sounded more like a royal progress! As for the real enemy, Tyrone, apparently he had been forgotten. In conclusion Harrington repeated Essex' remark that it would be a fine thing to be King of Ireland. Elizabeth shook with anger. Essex might as well have added the old boast: A Devereux is as good as a Tudor any day.

King of Ireland . . . She dwelt on this for hours.

Was that a part of his ambition now? Did he really propose, therefore, to reach a private agreement with Spain? Was it also his reason for refusing to obey orders? She grew sick with worry. She even admitted, though for a brief moment only, that she was too old and weary to cope with the antics of the headstrong Essex.

The next morning she felt only anger and wrote a stern, uncompromising letter in which she berated him for his waste of time and money, his use of a large army against a handful of unimportant local rebels, his posturing—she recalled his

own phrase and twisted it—like a queen in trunk hose from whom she would suffer no further disobedience.

"I hereby command you to set up garrisons in the north," she concluded, "and, without additional dallying, bring the rebel earl to his knees."

But long after the letter had been dispatched she was troubled by the thought, which quickly became a conviction, that Essex might not obey. To her relief, she received prompt word that after assembling his army in Dublin, he was now marching north against Tyrone. This was confirmed by Harrington, who reported however, that Essex was in a sulky and defiant mood. Sulkiness and defiance could always be expected. At least he had deigned to obey, whatever his mood, and this for the moment was all that mattered.

Elizabeth moved restlessly from Whitehall to Nonesuch, a small royal retreat in Surrey, to await the result of the campaign which had been launched at last. She received incoherent letters from Essex and sober, clear-cut reports from Harrington. Tyrone commanded an army superior in strength to Essex', even though Elizabeth had dispatched reinforcements to Ireland. Essex, verging on hysteria, was eager to attack one moment, yet ready to retreat the next and await a more favorable opportunity.

And then, with startling suddenness, came the news that the campaign was over. Elizabeth could hardly believe her ears when Robert Cecil told her that Essex, without any attempt to engage the enemy, had come to terms with the Earl of Tyrone.

"Tell me the nature of the terms," she gasped.

"A truce of six weeks, madam, to be renewed for similar periods while peace negotiations go forward."

"The arrogant fool! Next we shall hear that Tyrone has been granted a pardon."

"That has already happened, Your Majesty."

Elizabeth struggled for words, but none came. Robert Cecil looked worried and asked if she was in need of a physician. She shook her head dumbly. He then brought her a cup of water, but she dashed it from his hand.

"King Essex," she sobbed, "His Majesty King Essex!"

"We have another report from Harrington," Robert Cecil.

went on. "The Earl of Essex, for a time, contemplated a secret return to England, a march on London with his army—"

"Not King of Ireland, then, but King of England!"

"He only planned to set aside Your Majesty's government, not seize the throne. In a word, madam, to destroy the Cecil influence. However, the more sensible of his friends persuaded him against so wild an undertaking."

"Any attack on my government is an attack on myself. Do you still say that Essex has not yet committed a definite act of treason?"

"Contemplated, not committed," Robert Cecil said regretfully.

Elizabeth fell ill while trying to decide what action to take against her headstrong favorite. She cursed the doctors and she cursed herself. They, she knew, could do nothing for her; it was a sickness of the spirit, not of the body. Medicine was useless; she must cure herself, remember William Cecil's dying words: "That you should never fail yourself is my only prayer." Her illness caused London to buzz with a rumor that she had suddenly died. She shook her head gloomily when Robert Cecil told her this and quoted a Latin tag: *Mortua sed non sepulta*.

"'Dead but not buried,' " he echoed gently. "Shame on you, madam, shame on you."

She stirred herself then, as she saw he had intended her to.

"Tell me the worst about Essex. By now he must have committed some further folly."

"When the rumor of Your Majesty's death reached him, he decided to select a band of men as hot-headed as himself, men who would follow him blindly wherever he might lead them. Once again he was contemplating an attack on the government, and possibly with some hope of success, since Your Majesty's death would have caused utter confusion in London—"

"Ah yes," she interrupted, "the old problem of my not having definitely named the Scottish king my heir." She frowned; her memory, dull and lethargic during her illness, was now regaining its usual acuteness. "How could Essex have heard the rumor so quickly?"

"It was circulated some weeks ago, madam. We withheld it from you. When told that Your Majesty was indeed alive, Essex changed his mind again. According to Harrington, he spoke of abandoning his command in Ireland and returning to England to throw himself upon your mercy."

"Mercy . . ." Elizabeth pondered. "Is there any left in me?"

"To throw up his command would be a serious offense against the crown," Robert Cecil said quietly. "I have already warned him and only hope he will never dare."

"Essex would dare anything," she said bitterly.

Next morning she rose late and lingered long before her mirror, wearing only a dressing gown and rejecting one by one the wigs which her ladies offered her. Dead but not buried, she thought, staring in horror at her reflection. Her eyes were as black and sharp as ever, but her face, unpainted, was unquestionably lined and her nose stood out like the beak of some strange bird. The fault wasn't hers, she thought indignantly, and age itself had nothing to do with it. Cares of state and the anguish of mind caused by Essex were solely responsible. She tried to smile and only leered. By God, the mirror was at fault too. It was full of distorting lights, false reflections.

"I want all the mirrors removed," she commanded. "Here, Whitehall, Greenwich, everywhere—" She broke off. "What was that noise in the presence chamber? It sounded like the tramp of an army!"

The door was torn open, and there stood Essex. His clothing was badly crumpled, his face was streaked with dirt, his heavy riding boots were caked with mud. Imperiously he ordered her ladies from the room; they fled, screaming. Then he flung himself at her feet and, panting, laid his head in her lap. Conscious chiefly of her own sorry appearance, Elizabeth remained speechless. Essex had never seen her without a wig; nor had he ever dared to burst into her presence while the toilet was in progress. She snatched up the nearest wig, adjusted it as best she could, and began to feel more in control of the situation.

Essex looked up at her beseechingly. "Madam, I had to reach

you before my enemies could seize me. Robert Cecil himself tried to stop me, but by God I threw him aside!"

"Why did you leave Ireland?" She asked tonelessly.

"I had no choice. It was a matter of reaching you before my enemies at court poisoned your mind completely."

"If my mind has been poisoned, your own actions are the cause."

He sprang to his feet. "I crossed England in three days. God, what a mad ride *that* was!"

"Did you bring an army with you?"

"An army?" Essex laughed shrilly. "I brought a handful of men. I *had* to, for my own protection. Otherwise Robert Cecil would have had me intercepted. In any case, would you expect a man of my position to travel unattended?"

Crazy as he sounded, arrogant and defiant as he undoubtedly still was, the sound of his voice, reviving old and happier memories, echoed not unpleasingly in her ears.

"Go to your apartments," she said gently. "The earl marshal still has apartments wherever the court is in residence. You need a bath and a change of clothing. Present yourself again when I send for you. Such enemies as you have at court will not be permitted to stand between us."

His immediate laugh of triumph made her regret her gentleness. Plainly he thought himself complete master of the situation now and felt sure he would soon be restored to full favor. He embraced her swiftly, kissed her cheeks, murmured that they would spend a merry evening together, and ran from the room.

Her ladies returned, she completed her dressing and then, her mind in confusion, she sent for Robert Cecil.

"I am pleased to see," she greeted him, "that in throwing you aside, Essex did you no injury."

"That Your Majesty remains uninjured is all that matters."

"Oh come, his mood was scarcely as dangerous as that!"

"Madam, he reached London with three hundred men. His mood was dangerous enough then. Had the court been at Whitehall, he would have attacked us all. But to have attacked us swiftly here at Nonesuch would have meant passing over

London Bridge. The fortifications there would have been too strong for him. He may or may not have contemplated an attempt. However, he eventually decided to cross the river by ferry from Westminster to Lambeth with six attendants only. I urge you, madam, to place him under arrest."

"He can do no harm for the moment," Elizabeth faltered.

"As you will, madam."

"Wait! Was my life ever really in danger?"

"Not your life, madam, but certainly your liberty."

"What has happened to his three hundred men?"

"They are at large in London, and for all we know are fomenting trouble among the extreme Puritans. Naturally, madam, a close watch will be kept on the Puritans."

Elizabeth began to feel desperate. "Can you give me proof that Essex intended an attack, if the court had been at Whitehall?"

"Not actual proof, madam, but if certain men are arrested and questioned in the torture chamber—"

"I won't allow that!" she said sharply. "I'll talk to Essex myself. It may be possible to provoke him into an admission."

She decided not to send for him until after dinner, yet so great was the man's self-confidence that he appeared uninvited at the dinner table. Very well, she thought, let him continue to puff himself up. Confidence would breed boastfulness, and boastfulness was ever his greatest weakness. She smiled on him benignly, gave him her arm when dinner was finished and bade him walk with her for an hour in the garden.

"This is just like old times!" he cried.

"Yes," she agreed, "yes . . ."

"Have you written any poems during my absence? I myself wrote several in Ireland."

"I have written nothing," she said lightly, "but after you tell me the full story of your pathetic march against Tyrone I may be able to write something in the nature of a lament."

A sulky look crossed his face. "To have joined battle with Tyrone would have been to court certain failure."

"Why so?"

"My army was much reduced in numbers."

"What caused the reduction? Your pointless attacks on the tiny rebel bands south of Dublin?"

"Your Majesty seems intent on labeling me a coward," Essex said haughtily. "My army was reduced by sickness and desertion, hampered by insufferable disobedience." He laughed wildly. "I dealt with the disobedience, by God! It was centered chiefly in one regiment. I cashiered the officers, with the exception of one insolent lieutenant. Him I hanged on the spot. And then, I hanged every tenth man. It was a grim warning. I exacted obedience in the end, by God!"

"I wonder if you did, Essex?" Elizabeth asked heatedly. "I fail to see how a man incapable of obedience himself can exact it from others. You realize, of course, that your greatest act of disobedience, the desertion of your command, makes it imperative for me to have you arrested and brought to trial?"

"You would never dare!" he gasped.

"In this instance, contrary to what you so firmly believe, a Tudor is better than a Devereux—any day!"

"Prove it by arresting me! My friends will spring to my defence, free me at any cost, however bloody the slaughter!"

Too sick at heart to listen longer, or gaze upon his quivering features, Elizabeth turned from him and walked slowly back to the palace. To see him again, even for a moment, would make her as ridiculous in her own eyes as she had been for years in the eyes of others.

Then she noticed for the first time that guards had been placed unobtrusively in strategic parts of the garden, that six or seven of them had closed in behind her now. They followed her all the way to the presence chamber, where Robert Cecil was anxiously waiting.

"Have the Earl of Essex arrested," she said quietly. "Place him in the custody of the lord keeper. Bring him before the privy council as soon as you can."

"I had in mind the star chamber, madam."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I gained no admission of a planned rebellion, only a wild threat that his friends would rise to his aid. If that actually happens, then yes, the star chamber."

"There'll be no rising now, madam. A lot of stupid talk in the taverns, perhaps, but no rising. However, if Essex is given enough rope—"

"No, it would trouble my conscience sorely if, through any action of mine, he hanged himself. I gave him too much rope in earlier days, God forgive me."

"The weakness of his character would have come to the surface in any case, madam. That weakness, which he regards as strength, had much to do with your giving him, as you say, too much rope in earlier days."

"Thank you for trying to absolve me of all blame," Elizabeth said. Unfortunately she remembered that Robin Dudley had warned her of the young man just before his death. "Essex cashiered the officers of a whole regiment," she went on grimly. "I want them reinstated. He hanged a lieutenant and every tenth man of that same regiment. I want the nearest relatives to receive adequate pensions. As for Essex, let the council examine him, question him about his conduct in Ireland. Let them find him guilty, as indeed they are bound to do, and sentence him according to law."

"Close confinement during Your Majesty's pleasure . . ."

"That will be sufficient to restrain him," she sighed. "Therefore let the law take its course."

Chapter 55

"The tears of my heart have quenched all the fires of pride that were in me."

With a deep sigh Elizabeth reread this first line of yet another letter from Essex. They were reaching her almost daily now, these wild, poetic letters. Some she kept, others she destroyed, and never yet had she answered one of them.

She read another line.

"In all haste do I address the happy presence from which only unhappy Essex is banished!"

She sighed again. Years ago such words would have been suf-

ficient to restore him to favor, but not now, not now. Hardening her heart still more, she cast her mind back over the ten months that had passed since his return to England. After his arrest he had fallen quite desperately ill, the illness aggravated when none of his friends had shown any sign of springing to his aid. Compassionately Elizabeth had sent her own physicians to attend him. She had even sent him a jar of broth. But he had flung it to the floor, saying that even if it contained no actual poison, broth from her would still be poison enough.

At that time he was lodged at the lord keeper's residence, York House, but after weeks of illness, during which it had not been possible for him to be brought before the privy council, Elizabeth had permitted his removal, still under guard, to his own house. At last, when he was much recovered, he appeared before the privy council. He was expelled from that august body, deprived of the office of earl marshal, replaced as master of the horse and condemned to be kept in custody during the queen's pleasure. This verdict had brought from him a bitter letter. Custody, if it pleased Her Majesty, meant nothing to him; what rankled was the humiliation of being reduced to the status of an ordinary private citizen.

Elizabeth now read yet another line of his most recent letter.

"I long to kiss the fair correcting hand which pours balm on my lesser wounds but leaves the greater wound still smarting."

He was free of all restraint now. That was what he meant by the lesser wounds. But he was not and never would be permitted to appear at court. This, then, was the greater wound. She wondered if she had been wise in removing the guard from Essex House, but obviously a guard could not be kept there for the rest of his life. It seemed to her now that when Robert Cecil had urged her to send Essex to the Tower he had provoked the move, a move that had surprised many, raised hope in Essex of complete forgiveness, and started the flow of these beseeching, flattering letters.

My heart is dead to flattery, Elizabeth told herself, and without reading further, tore the letter to shreds. She had been influenced, she knew, by the faint hope that to set him free would be a step toward his complete reformation. Then,

looking up quickly, she saw that Robert Cecil had come silently into the room and was standing by her desk.

"It scarcely matters, madam," he said, "that the guard was removed from Essex House. Even while Essex was ill at York House, letters were smuggled out from him to Mountjoy. Fortunately Mountjoy has now decided to confide in the government. I have his letter here."

Lord Mountjoy was the new lord deputy of Ireland, a man once known to be on good terms with Essex.

"It was Mountjoy's appointment," Robert Cecil went on, "that influenced Essex. He felt that with Mountjoy in control of the Irish army, his plot would have every chance of success."

"For heaven's sake come to the point!" Elizabeth complained. "What plot is this? And do you mean that while Essex bombards me with submissive letters he is actually plotting against me?"

"Against the government, madam. *You* are—or were—to be coerced."

"How?"

"The plot has, of course, collapsed. This, however, is what Essex proposed to do: The King of Scotland was to raise a strong army and Mountjoy was to join him with five thousand men. Together they were to march into England, overthrow Your Majesty's government and set up Essex as a sort of prime minister. Essex was then to declare King James heir to the English throne."

"And I myself?"

"In Essex' words, Your Majesty would have been permitted to remain on the throne for the few remaining years of your life."

"So very generous of him! But what of James, was he *really* involved?"

"The King of Scotland expressed a guarded interest, no more. Yet he assembled an army near the border."

"Did he, by God!"

"For maneuvers only, madam. We must accept his word for that."

"I'll never name him my heir now, never!"

Robert Cecil smiled faintly. "Not even with your last breath, madam?"

Elizabeth smiled too. She had decided reluctantly that James was the logical choice, but she knew that to name him outright would be to give other lesser claimants a chance to plot against him before her death and cause the disruption so feared by her government.

"Perhaps with my last breath," she conceded. "Are you by any chance communicating with James about this?"

Robert Cecil hesitated. "Well, yes. A guarded hint here and there, concerning the government's attitude, not Your Majesty's. And King James is sworn to secrecy. I judged this necessary to offset a rash move on his part. And I pointed out that if he listened to Essex and made a false step, he might inadvertently suffer the same fate as his mother."

Elizabeth rose from the desk and slapped the hunchback on the shoulder.

"You are by no means as great a man as your father, young Robert, but you learn, you learn!"

Robert Cecil picked up the stout cane which she had taken to using surreptitiously these days and handed it to her. She snatched at it and flung it beneath the desk.

"You learn in some things," she cried furiously, "but in others, the things that matter to a woman, you will never learn!"

Robert Cecil smiled serenely. "And now, madam, having made you angry, have I your permission to order Essex' arrest and bring him to trial before the star chamber?"

"I see I misjudged you," Elizabeth chuckled. "However, Essex shall not be arrested."

"If you misjudged me, madam, I myself miscalculated."

Afterward, remembering his words and the inward smile of his eyes, she wondered if he really had miscalculated. He had once wanted her to give Essex enough rope, and that could well happen, if Essex remained at liberty. Having failed in one plot the headstrong man might rashly attempt another. It was a tormenting thought.

She still felt that it would trouble her conscience if, through any action of hers, Essex hanged himself. On the other hand, while she had treated him leniently, hoping vainly to see him reform, he had plotted against the government, had in fact given himself enough rope to bring about a charge of treason. No

one could blame her if she signed his death warrant this very day. She cursed herself for having looked with favor upon his handsome face, and she cursed him for filling her old age with misery. *Old age!* Ah, well, she would soon be sixty-seven, and she used a cane when climbing the long stairs at Whitehall. She might as well admit her years, if only to herself. She laughed, but not in real merriment; the time was fast approaching when, instead of talking of her youthfulness, she would boast about the ripeness of her years.

The pleading letters from Essex continued to pour in, and meanwhile Robert Cecil, with all the cunning of the late Walsingham, kept a close watch on him and his friends. Essex House soon became the open meeting place of the disaffected, and much rash talk reached Elizabeth's ears. So much hot air, she said, yet waited anxiously for the outcome. It was thought that Essex was intriguing with Spain, but Spain no longer troubled her, not even in respect of Ireland. A Spanish force had landed, but Mountjoy had driven it back, and there was every sign that he would soon be master of Ireland.

Toward the end of September—Essex had sent Elizabeth a poem in honor of her sixty-seventh birthday on the seventh—he wrote in reference to the wine lease. Sending for the accounts, she discovered that he had made a vast fortune out of its administration. The lease was due for renewal on Michaelmas Day, the twenty ninth. Small wonder Essex was growing anxious! For in spite of the profits he had made, he was heavily in debt to the moneylenders. To reduce him to complete beggary would surely clip his wings forever, and perhaps, even at this late stage, bring him to his senses.

"Let the earl be informed that the wine lease will now revert to the crown," she said. "I have hand-fed Essex too long. Tell him that the more one feeds a corrupt body, the more hurt one does it."

The letters from Essex ceased abruptly, but his words on learning her decision were relayed by Robert Cecil, who now had several trusted spies at Essex House.

"The earl flew into a rage, madam. He declared that he knew now what was expected of him. He added that he had no inten-

tion of being beholden to an old woman who was—forgive me, Your Majesty—crooked in mind and body.”

“I use a cane on occasion, but my back is as straight as ever!” Elizabeth cried. “Straighter by far than his, and my mind too! What does he mean by saying that he knows now what is expected of him?”

“We can only wait and see, madam.”

Crooked in mind and body. . . . She dwelt angrily upon the words. She had been crooked enough in mind at times; her love for him, her mother-son, mistress-lover infatuation had made her so. But crooked in body . . . She glanced at Robert Cecil's more than rounded shoulders. Was Essex sneering, through her, at this most trusted servant? She doubted it. Essex, always outspoken, never hesitated to say what was foremost in his mind.

Crooked in body . . . She thought of the only crookedness, known to no living person but herself, that had ever mattered. The old resentment had ceased to trouble her—at sixty-seven a rotten tooth was more disquieting—but now the past came flooding back. Had Essex listened to old gossip? There had been much avid speculation at foreign courts, in England itself, for that matter. After the Alençon debacle the Queen of England was said to be neither man nor woman. Had he listened and was he stabbing at her now with all the viciousness of the baser side of his nature? Whatever the truth might be, his words, reviving the past, had brought her in close contact once more with *that* woman. “From myself my other self I turn,” she whispered, but it was useless, because the other self, now resurrected, would not be turned away. “My care is like my shadow in the sun . . .” There had been so many cares, but *that* woman, more demanding even than Essex, was and always had been the greatest care of them all. She was the cause of all her troubles, all the bad times of her life, certainly the cause of her humiliating infatuation for Essex. If only she could be faced squarely and driven out again!

As the year drew to a close Robert Cecil reported that while the gatherings at Essex House continued openly, secret meetings were taking place at Drury House, the Earl of Southamp-

ton's London residence. Elizabeth's secretary of state had spies at Drury House as well. Looking at the little hunchback closely, Elizabeth had the strong impression that he had turned into a grinning cat, a cat greedily watching the mouse that would soon make him a tasty meal. That was what Essex was, of course, a silly little mouse, not the great trumpeting elephant he thought himself, still less the lion rampant.

"Are we menaced by an invincible armada?" she asked impatiently. "Are we threatened by an irresistible French invasion? Really, Robert Cecil, the Essex problem today is smaller than any molehill, not higher than the highest mountain. Essex is merely a frustrated little boy playing an angry little game."

"And the game, madam, is rebellion."

"*Rebellion?*"

"The game encompasses the seizing of the Tower, the City of London and the palace of Whitehall."

"An ambitious little game, to be sure! Has Essex a large secret army at his command?"

"Three hundred picked men, madam, each as desperate and reckless as Essex himself."

"And surely as stupid!"

"It might not be difficult for them to seize Whitehall," Cecil went on, "and after Whitehall, the Tower and the City. Or rather, if we were not prepared for the attack, it might not be difficult. This, madam, is the Essex plan: Four parties of innocent-seeming gentlemen are held in readiness. One party is to assemble loosely, like sight-seers up from the country, at the palace gates. The others, respectively, are to stroll into the great hall, the guard chamber and the presence chamber. At a prearranged signal the guards at these four strategic points are to be overpowered—"

"What a pity Essex failed to put this genius for planning to better use in Ireland! But go on, go on!"

"With the guards overpowered, Essex himself is to come to Whitehall and invite Your Majesty to dismiss the present government. If you refuse, we are all to be flung into the Tower, leaving Essex to form a government of his own. Obviously nothing of the sort can happen now, but I am hoping that Your Majesty will let it partly happen."

"You want Essex to walk into a trap and commit himself fully."

"Yes, madam."

It was a tempting suggestion.

"When is the attack supposed to take place?"

"Tomorrow morning, since tomorrow is Sunday and a full court will be assembled to attend Your Majesty to prayers."

"I'll give the matter an hour's thought," she said.

It was now midmorning. She pondered the matter till noon, continued to think about it during dinner, and was still undecided when Robert Cecil waited on her at three in the afternoon. To agree to his suggestion would be to give Essex all the rope that was needed and so, by her own deliberate action, bring him to the block.

"I counsel immediate action," Robert Cecil said, revealing a change of mind himself. "Things are likely to get out of hand. Some wilder members of the Essex party are now besporting themselves at the Globe Theater—"

"What in God's name has the Globe Theater to do with rebellion?"

"Madam, they have hired a man called Shakespeare, an actor of sorts and, I believe, a rather promising writer of plays, to present a scene depicting the overthrow of King Richard II. The inference is most pointed."

"By God it is! Richard was a tyrant. I, a tyrant in Essex' eyes, am also to be dragged from the throne!"

"Essex is furious that so broad a hint should have been given," Robert Cecil went on, "and may decide to attack at any moment. I have already taken the liberty of ordering him to appear at once before the council. I have also trebled the palace guard."

Essex, however, refused to obey the order. And when Elizabeth, anxious now to bring the whole unhappy business to a close, commanded that he should be brought to Whitehall under guard Robert Cecil advised against it.

"Essex House is surrounded by an excited mob, madam. Essex has spread word that the council plans his murder, your own imprisonment, and the setting up of one of the remote Spanish claimants. The arrival of soldiers at Essex House would cause bloodshed."

"That I will not have!"

"Essex, then, must be persuaded to come forth peaceably."

Early the next morning, with the City now in tumult, Elizabeth sent the lord keeper, the chief justice, and two other members of the council to reason with Essex and convince him that he could achieve nothing now but the shedding of innocent blood.

He retaliated by imprisoning the four royal emissaries, then emerged excitedly from Essex House and marched into the City at the head of two hundred men. The situation was ticklish, with false rumors spreading in all directions and Essex proclaiming that he was marching on Whitehall to free the queen from her captors.

Intent on riding into the City herself, Elizabeth called for the armor she had worn at Tilbury, but Robert Cecil dissuaded her. He assured her that he had already taken all necessary action. Soldiers were slipping quietly into the streets. If Essex retreated, he would find Ludgate impassable, and meanwhile a royal herald, following in the wake of the insurgents, was proclaiming the truth and denouncing him as a traitor.

"London could never resist a royal herald," Elizabeth said quietly. "The best thing I can do now—indeed, the only thing!—is to go quietly to my dinner."

During the early afternoon she learned that Essex had led a charge against the guard at Ludgate, had been repulsed and, escaping by the river, had returned in safety to Essex House. Barricades had been set up and he had appeared briefly and wildly at a window, shouting that he would die defending the realm. But later, with the lord admiral preparing to attack Essex House from the river, he emerged with tears streaming down his cheeks and surrendered. He, and the leading conspirators, were taken to Lambeth Palace for the night and the next morning removed to the Tower.

The rest was inevitable. The trial could result in only one verdict. When the death warrant was at last placed before Elizabeth, she could see, by Robert Cecil's watchful look, that he and all her councilors expected her to delay the signing, as she had delayed again and again in the case of Mary Stuart. This time, however, she seized the pen and signed without a mo-

ment's hesitation. Later she wondered if *that* woman had done the signing for her, so firmly had her fingers grasped the pen. It hardly seemed to matter.

"*Mortua sed non sepulta*," she muttered dully. "Dead, more so than ever now, but not yet buried."

Chapter 56

"I do beg you, madam, to take a little more nourishment."

Elizabeth, not quite certain who had spoken, stared vaguely about the bedchamber. Robert Cecil was there on her left, Lord Admiral Howard was on her right, and at the foot of the bed she saw the Archbishop of Canterbury. He, of course, was more concerned with her soul than her body, so it must have been either young Robert or old Howard who had uttered the words. She caught a glimpse of the bowl in Robert Cecil's hand. He had been feeding her broth, she remembered that now, just as years ago she herself had fed broth to the dying Hatton, more recently to the dying William Cecil.

Robert Cecil moved closer with the bowl. "Madam—"

"Swallow the lot yourself," she said and closed her eyes.

She was well aware that she had been slowly dying for the last two years, even though the fawning courtiers still complimented her on the excellence of her health, the vigor of her step. Apparently nobody had noticed the way she had staggered beneath the weight of the parliamentary robes at the opening of her last Parliament.

"Is the court still at Richmond?" she asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Elizabeth had come to Richmond Palace because Dr. Dee, reading the stars on her behalf, had predicted that Whitehall, during the winter following her sixty-ninth birthday, would be dangerous to her health. What he had failed to predict was that she would catch a chill while making the journey to Richmond, a chill that would weaken her seriously.

"Is it Your Majesty's wish that the King of Scotland should be informed of this distressing illness?"

It was Robert Cecil again; she opened her eyes and laughed in his face.

"I know the way your mind works, young Robert. Obviously you sent word to James days ago. More than likely you have already drawn up his proclamation. How nice for all of you that James VI of Scotland shall become James I of England."

"Your Majesty is willing now to name him your heir?"

"Young Robert!"

"Madam?"

"When the end comes no male hand must touch the body of the queen who lived and died a virgin. Nor must it be submitted to dissection, as royal bodies are. As for embalmmment, that I also forbid. Are my wishes clearly understood?"

"Clearly, madam."

Happy that her secret would die with her, Elizabeth felt amazingly at peace.

"And your heir, madam?"

"You yourself have named him for me," she said stubbornly. "Now send for the archbishop. No doubt I need his prayers."

Presently, her eyelids drooping heavily, she saw the archbishop. He was kneeling by the bed. Straining her ears, she caught the drone of his voice. She felt as if she were struggling against sleep, but sleep was overcoming her. The voice stopped, and that was annoying. Too tired to speak, she made an imperious gesture with her hand, Again and again when the droning stopped, she made the same gesture. After a time she smiled lazily to herself. Never before in his life had the poor old man been forced to pray so long. By God, he'd be glad when she breathed her last.

And so, she thought, will I.

Victoria and Albert

EVELYN ANTHONY

"The King is Dead. God Save the Queen."

When Victoria heard these words, she was a tiny, blue-eyed, fair-haired girl, scarcely eighteen and bearing little resemblance to the formidable Widow of Windsor she later became. But this is a novel about Victoria the wife, not the widow, beginning with youth and marriage and ending, as a vital part of Victoria's life ended, with the death of Albert, the only person she ever loved.

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